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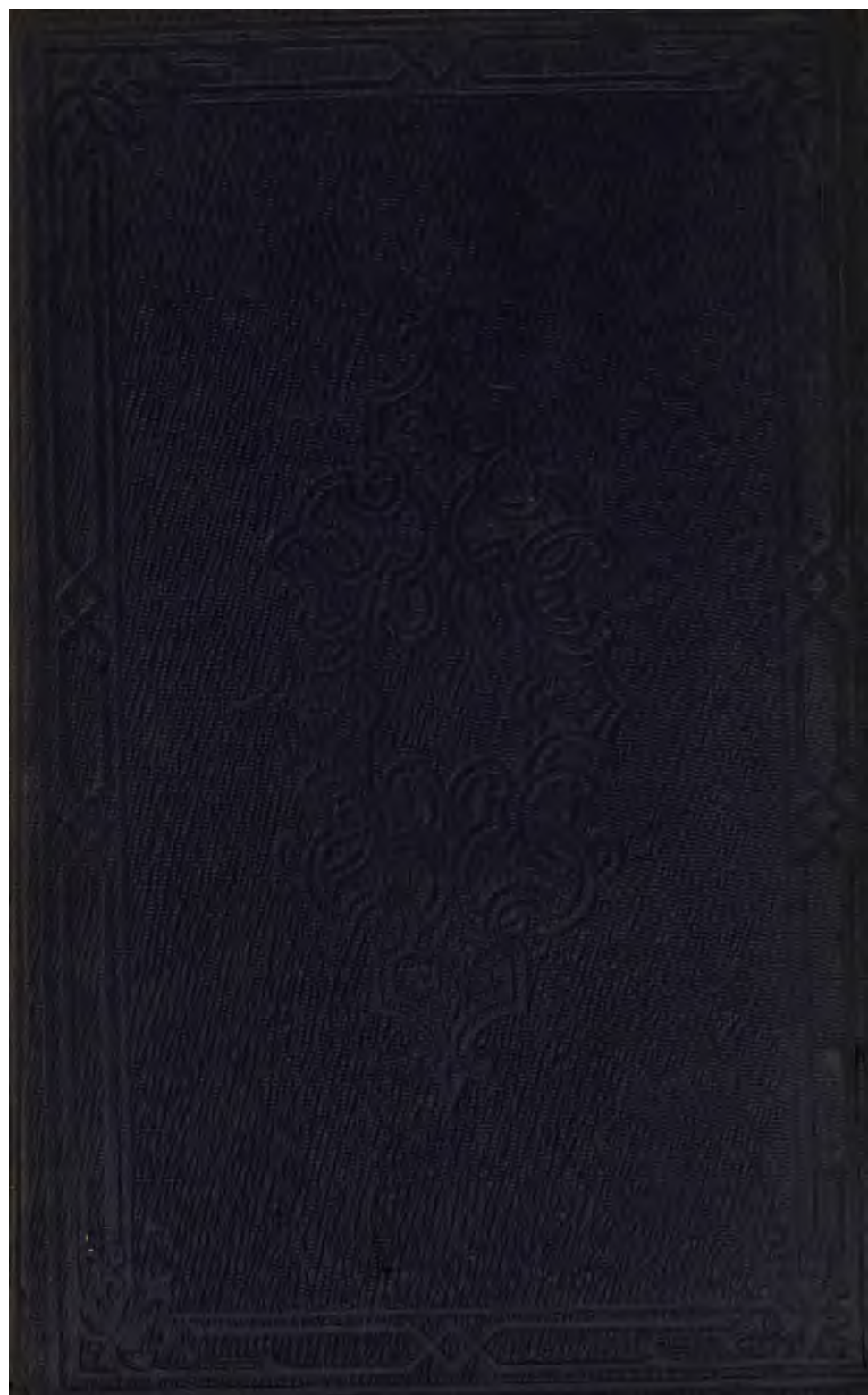
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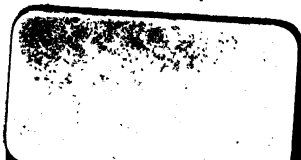
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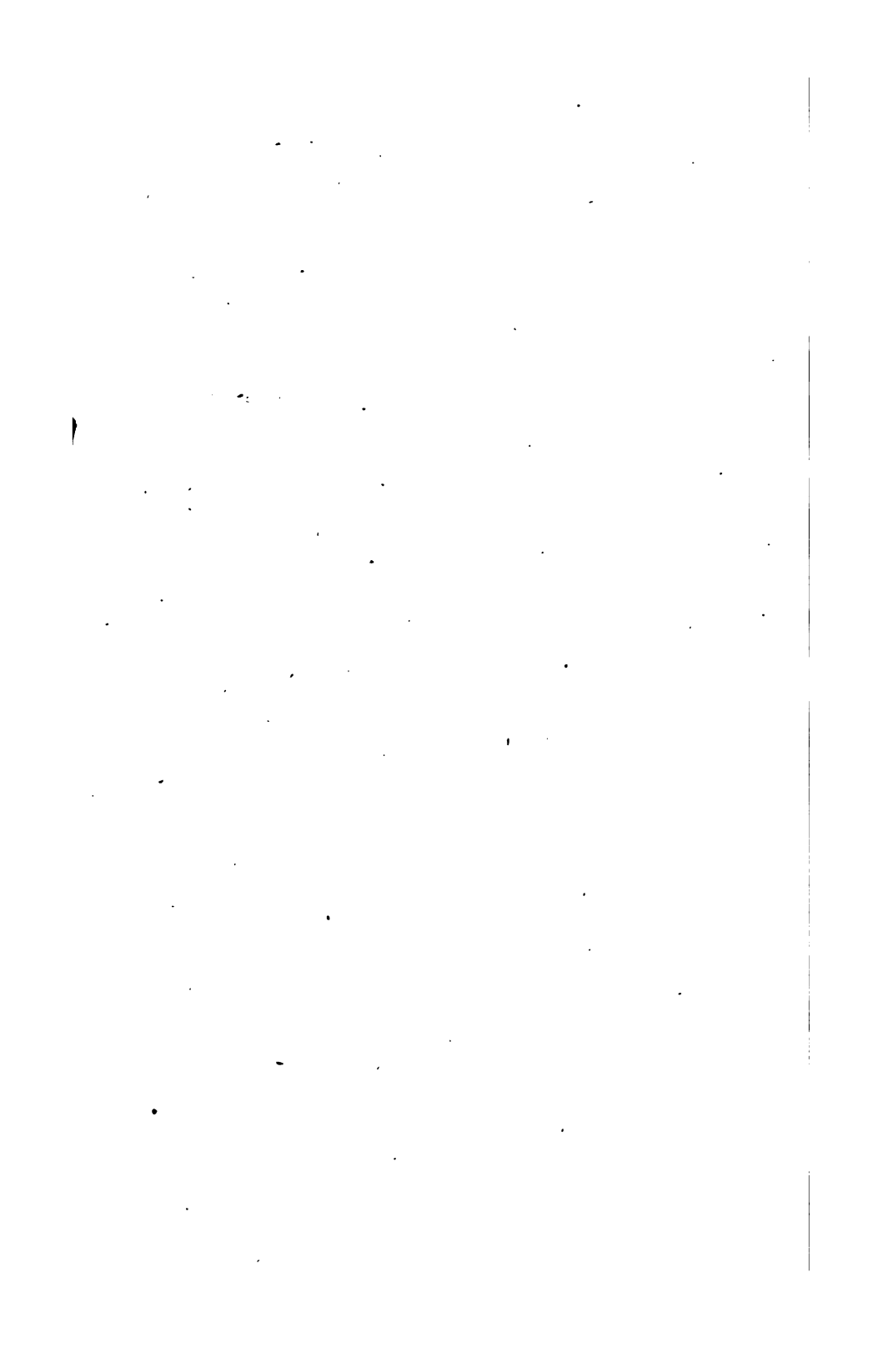
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THE
YOUNG HUSBAND.

BY MRS. GREY,

AUTHOR OF

"THE GAMBLER'S WIFE," "MARY SEAHAM,"
&c. &c.

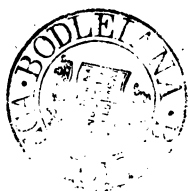
"Such was the youth to whom a love
For grace and beauty far above
Their due deserts, betrayed a heart,
Which might have else performed a prouder part."
PHILIP VON ARTEVELD.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,
SUCCESSORS TO HENRY COLBURN,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.
1854.

249. v. 510.



THE YOUNG HUSBAND.

CHAPTER I.

Two years had been the period Mrs. Fitz-Henry had assigned as requisite for the course of severe study, which was to prepare her daughter for the stage; but we find that not one year has passed, and Stella has made her most successful and triumphant *débüt*.

The fact was, that with the innate genius she possessed, combined with the most efficient artistical instructions received from her

earliest years, far less time than could have been supposed possible was required to qualify her for that important and difficult vocation.

The manager of the Milan theatre, at that period one of the most distinguished in Italy, visited the academy at Florence, heard, saw her, and was delighted; astonished as much with the dramatic talent displayed by the young English girl, as with her wonderful singing.

Her youthful grace and loveliness heightened her value in his eyes; in short, experienced perception showed him at once that, English woman though she was, she would prove in every respect a star, a treasure, as the prima soprano of the Theatre della Scala, in the place of one of whose services he had been unexpectedly deprived.

The manager lost no time in gaining an introduction to Mrs. Fitz-Henry, and in making overtures for her daughter. They were at first decidedly rejected; Mrs. Fitz-Henry did not think that it would be doing justice to her daughter's future prospects, to allow her

thus prematurely to bring her powers into action.

The director strenuously combated the idea. He argued that this was the very juncture when the young lady's voice, in its full freshness and strength, might most advantageously be called into exercise; that it would be wasting those powers to employ them further in the drudgery of instruction, which it was easy to discern previous tuition of a scarce less able and efficient nature had almost rendered unnecessary.

Flattered and gratified alike as were the mother and the artist in Mrs. Fitz-Henry, by this implied compliment, she was still wavering, when Stella herself joined the conclave.

On being enlightened as to the object of the signor's visit, the young cantatrice's countenance immediately lighted up with excitement and delight at the suggestion. With the usual restlessness of genius, her spirit had already begun to struggle impatiently beneath the constraint and drudgery of instruction, and

was now only too ready to acquiesce in the manager's flattering verdict, to feel with him the folly and inutility of thus further employing powers so ready in their vigorous buoyancy to which and take at once the high position fly forth, awaited them.

We will not say how much another influence, lately stirred within her breast, had added fuel to this impatience of spirit,—this thirsting for some excitement, some object to exhaust the fire of passionate feeling which had been kindled therein. The idea, then, of so soon breaking through the weary thralldom thus unexpectedly presented, was by her hailed with rapture, and she eagerly besought her mother to listen to the director's representations.

The animation of her countenance, the graceful energy of her gestures whilst pleading her cause, only added to the signor's anxiety in the matter; and when, at some suggestion on his part that she should give a specimen of her dramatic powers, she started suddenly from the kneeling posture into which she had thrown

herself at her mother's knee, and assuming at once an attitude of inexpressible grace, broke forth into the beautiful and impassioned solo of the opera, in the study of which she had been lately engaged—

“ Ah non giunge.”

The signor, at its close, when she stood in her own sweet natural attitude, smiling before her judges, could scarcely refrain from throwing himself at her feet, to worship a star of such bright promise, whilst the mother turned away her head to hide the tear of proud and gratified emotion which dimmed her eye-lids.

Suffice it to say, Signor —— left the house triumphant and rejoicing.

At the appointed period, Mrs. Fitz-Henry had removed to Milan, the necessary rehearsals were gone through, and early in the spring, as we have seen, Stella shot forth on the firmament of fame, with even more than predicted brilliancy.

* * * * *

The *élite* of the young prima donna's de-

lighted audience did not fail to wait upon her and her mother on the following day, at least to leave their cards, and make inquiries. Claud's friends were amongst the number, but not he himself; a feeling of mingled pride and jealous tenderness kept him back from pressing forward amongst the many in this common and general attention.

Besides, did not the remembrance of the scene between himself and Mrs. Fitz-Henry on their last meeting at Florence, almost forgotten in the excitement of the preceding night, now on cooler reflection, return somewhat unpleasantly to his remembrance?

He was gratified, however, to learn that no visitor had been admitted—no one had seen Stella. Even Lord Duncan, spite of the courtliness of manner with which Mrs. Fitz-Henry had received his proposal to visit them, had been denied admittance.

It was evidently not the good lady's intention that her daughter should receive company at home. It was, however, rumoured, that at a musical entertainment to be given by Lord

Duncan, on a night when La Scala was closed, the young cantatrice would appear, and to this *réunion* Claud had been also invited.

But he saw her first again at the opera, personating *Giulietta*—*Giulietta*, “warm vision of the south,” how fitly personified by that fair, that pure-hearted, high-minded girl.

She had been the wonderful actress on the preceding occasion, carried out of herself by the power of genius—the triumph of art—but here she was herself, a reality, a perfect embodiment of the part she played; the all exquisite grace, the tender sensibility of the Italian maiden seemed to live and breathe in the very form from which they had been so ardently emitted. She was so happy in the part which was here assigned her, that no effort seemed to be required. Those lute-like tones came forth so lovingly, as the spontaneous expression of an uncertain unrealized joy, trembling in very truth within the signor’s breast. The more passionate pathos of the closing scene, if less vividly portrayed, all produced that touching effect, which belongs invariably to a sense of nature and of truth.

But what was the sensation, the enchantment with which the young Loraine listened, gazed? Whilst Semiramide was being enacted, a painful mingling of jealousy, wonderment, and admiration had characterized the feelings of his mind. It was not *his* Stella—his simple, natural, and most bewitching Stella, whom he listened to and beheld. She, indeed—but in that brilliant costume, that unnatural character and situation, changed as by the power of a splendid enchantment into something magical, unreal, fantastical, carried from him into a sphere unattainable, or rather, perhaps, to speak more comprehensively, divided by the yawning vacuum of the vast *platea*, the impassable boundary of the flaring stage lights.

But now, when the broken link had been by a few delicious moments of communion restored,—now, as the Juliet, in her more natural costumes and simple adornments, giving vent to feelings and emotions, all beautiful and pure—alone, comparatively, for he had avoided the proximity of his intimate friends,

and had provided for himself a place in a box the very closest to the stage (whereas the night before, the one he had occupied had been one of the most central and distant of the vast area), so near, that he could catch the slightest glance of her bright dark eye, the every change and expression of her face,—all space, all sensible boundary seemed to be annihilated between them.

Nay, in the delicious entrancement of feeling in which he was thrown, all conscious ideality, save of his own and her being, appeared to vanish. It was "Claud, Claud," not Romeo, Romeo, which issued, with such thrilling sweetness from her lips. The Italian singer who personified that character, a shade, a nothing in his eyes; nay, he could almost without a pang see her in the closing scene supported like a broken lily in the arms of another, so much did his bewildered imagination hold his senses in thralldom, so strongly was he possessed by the delicious conviction that Stella reciprocated his every thought and sensation, that her voice, her acting, her every

look and gesture derived their inspiration solely from himself.

* * * * *

When the opera was over, he did not, could not press forward with the herd, as on the former occasion, but stood watching at a little distance the corner door, with its attendant carriage, for the appearance of its intended occupants.

The crowd there was fewer and more select than the first night, but still considerable ; all heads were uncovered as Stella herself the first appeared ; and with a light celerity which prevented those who would have stepped forward, Lord Duncan, among the foremost from proffering their assistance, sprang forward into the carriage. Mrs. Fitz-Henry then, with slower dignity, advanced, and the few words she seemed to speak to his assiduous lordship were perhaps to request that the flattering marks of attention which had been bestowed upon her daughter on the preceding occasion might be dispensed with ; for after conducting her to

the carriage, his lordship stepped back with a smile, and a bow of graceful acquiescence.

His example was followed by the rest, and the carriage suffered, in respectful silence, to drive away from the door, without another glimpse having been caught by one amongst the eager group of the fair face so carelessly averted, as soon as one quick glance had discovered that the sole object of her interest was not amongst the number.

No, that coveted boon was reserved for the solitary watcher in the distance, in whose direction Juliet's love-lit eyes were anxiously strained.

They passed near to the spot. A bouquet, with something sparkling brilliantly in the centre, fell upon her knee, and without Mrs. Fitz-Henry having remarked when or from whence it came, Stella cast it hastily into an open basket which lay at her feet, filled with the gifts of a similar nature, which had been showered upon her so lavishly on the stage, to be afterwards distinguished by its glittering accompaniment, and singled out from the mass.

Oh! how eagerly, and then how carefully preserved. She might, indeed, if questioned, have almost pleaded ignorance of the donor! for, standing there in the shadow of the wall, his face and figure were only dimly to be discerned.

Claud saw *her*, however, well. The carriage-lamp plainly revealed her face and form, as she sat there dressed but in the pure white garment she had worn whilst lying in the tomb,—paler too, perhaps less brilliant, than in the gorgeous costume of the Semiramide, and after the more unnatural excitement to which her powers had been strained in that part—yet lovelier, dearer, if possible, to his eyes and heart!

* * * * *

Mrs. Fitz-Henry did not refuse the invitation of Lord Duncan, but suffered her daughter, accompanied, of course, by herself, to attend his musical assembly. Such the entertainment was reported to be, but the company found in his lordship's superb palazzo equal

preparations made for dancing, Lord Duncan being almost as devoted a lover of Terpsichore as of the sister muse.

Much sensation was, as may be expected, created by the arrival of the young prima donna, "La Stella," or *L'Inglesina*, as some of the Italians also began to call her, the same name by which one of our English vocalists of an earlier date was known in Italy.

She came, dressed in glittering white, with no other ornament but one shining star, composed of brilliants, placed in the centre of the plait of hair encircling her graceful head, and attracting universal observation from its unique and appropriate beauty—type and signification not only of her name, but of the bright and sparkling character of her loveliness, never more conspicuous than on this occasion, her first *débüt*, as it might be said, in the private circles of gay society—circles in which her sweet and graceful vivacity made her so eminently calculated to shine. And a *naïve*, wild delight was soon dancing in her lustrous eyes, as she yielded to the pleasant excitement of

the scene and circumstances into which she found herself transported — the admiration she excited, the universal homage she received. Her singing, together with the other professionals, was, of course, the first grand feature of the evening festivities, but one which the noble host's considerate courtesy would not suffer to be prolonged ; and he himself, when at his command the *salle de danse* was thrown open, led out the young beauty to the dance, in which she delighted all observers by her vivacity and grace.

Up to that time Claud Loraine and Stella had not yet spoken ; yet, to say nothing of a smile exchanged between them on her entrance, the first glance at her appearance fully satisfied the young man. She wore for only ornament his star upon her brow ; and though encircled by admirers, hemmed in by busy flatterers, and occupied in her professional capacity, he could fix his eyes on the glittering token, and rejoice in the happy conviction, that her heart, her thoughts, were with him alone.—Yes ! that star had composed the

sparkling centre of the bouquet cast upon Stella's knees by Claud on leaving the opera the preceding night!

Mrs. Fitz-Henry had wondered and admired, for the brilliants which composed the small ornament were of the finest water. Her conclusion was, that either from Lord Duncan, whose munificence towards professional artists was notorious, or from some rich foreign nobleman amongst the audience, the splendid compliment had proceeded.

And Stella—alas! her first departure from the simple-hearted openness of her natural disposition, with her own better knowledge on the subject, suffered her to rest unenlightened as to the real fact; in her inexperienced simplicity, gladly receiving the beautiful present as a proof of her young lover's affection—without pausing to count the cost; to consider the unjustifiable extravagance on the part of one under his circumstances; how hardly to be spared the sum which alone could have drawn so costly a treasure from the *bottega della-Strada*.

But when the first dance was over, and Stella was passing down the room on her noble partner's arm, a few low words spoken by Claud into her ear claimed her for the next.

The fair arm was immediately withdrawn from that of her present companion with an unceremonious promptitude, which provoked a smile from Lord Duncan, as he relinquished the young beauty to the handsome youth, who had already become a great favourite of his. Young Loraine's good looks, and the impetuous *abandon* of his character and deportment, attracting and amusing his lordship's fancy.

It is needless to observe, that this latter part of the evening was the most delightful both to Stella and to Claud, for strange to say, Mrs. Fitz-Henry suffered them, without testifying much uneasiness, to be a good deal together till the close of the evening, although Stella was not allowed to dance many times, lest the unwonted fatigue should unfit her for the necessary avocations of the following day.

Indeed, the kindness of manner, mixed with a considerable degree of stateliness, which she showed towards the former offender, seemed to infer that his previous offences were either forgiven, or that motives of prudence or policy influenced her indulgence.

Stella availed herself of the first opportunity of thanking him most earnestly for his generous and very beautiful gift—but at the same time said—

“I fear, Mr. Loraine, my mother would be very angry if she had known whence it came.”

“Then she did not know?” Claud eagerly enquired.

“Oh, no,” colouring deeply, “I did not tell her—it was very wrong, I know—but I so wished to wear the beautiful star to-night.”

“And she would not have allowed you to wear *my* gift?”

“Of course not,” concealing her blushing face behind her fan.

“And why?”

"Why—how can you ask?—if you remember what happened at Florence."

"Oh, yes!" the young man exclaimed, with an outburst of his old petulance. "I quite understand—had it come from Lord Duncan, it would have been quite another thing."

Stella did not know—she only begged him not to speak or look so angry; if her mother were to observe it, she would not let them talk together any more.

"And you do not think she will prevent it in future?" was the anxious enquiry.

"Perhaps not," Stella answered, smiling, "if you promise to behave better than you did last year."

He sighed, and said he would try.

"But you, Stella—much you will care if you were never allowed to speak to me again, surrounded as you are by admiration and adulation; so bright, so wonderful a star as you have become."

"I have only become," she answered, half playfully, half sadly, "what you professed so

much to despise and reprobate—an *Opera singer*.”

“Oh, not despise, Stella. I only hate the position, the circumstances as the means of separating us from one another—if that were not to prove the consequence——.”

Mrs. Fitz-Henry's sudden contiguity cut short further conversation of this kind, nor was there any opportunity of its being renewed that night. But it signified not how short it had been—the train was once more started—the link restored, which even the most adverse circumstances would have been difficult to arrest or to control. But though over Stella much jealous vigilance was exercised by her mother ; though a kind of magic circle was drawn round *La Stella della Scala* ; which, whether in her professional capacity, or in the society in which she was to some extent suffered to mix, whilst it created only greater interest and attraction, was not without its effectual power over those it was designed to restrain ;—there was one to whom its influence was scarcely calculated to extend—

whose heart had long since passed every magic boundary which human power or foresight can erect.

Mrs. Fitz-Henry, whether she perceived the favourable effect ever produced by mental contentment upon her daughter's vocal condition, or that she looked upon this boyish lover in a less formidable light than many other of those by whom Stella was now surrounded—whether she piqued herself upon the restraining influence she fancied herself to possess over the impetuous youth whom she had once so humbled by her scorn and severity, or blinded by the cunning show of good behaviour it was his pleasure to assume—whether herself, insensibly brought once more under the influence of Claud's own irresistible fascination, she certainly allowed her jealous vigilance to relax a little on his behalf; and again his services and attentions were occasionally accepted in cases of emergency.

Besides, their stay at Milan was so circumscribed; she understood Mr. Loraine was to return to England in the summer, when they,

themselves, again repaired to Florence, where Stella was engaged as *prima donna* for the season. This consideration, perhaps, above all others, caused the mother's strict prudence with regard to the intercourse of the two young people to falter.

CHAPTER II.

THE day at last arrived when Stella was to make her last appearance at la Scala.

"Stella," Mrs. Fitz-Henry said, on the morning of that day, "you took leave of Mr. Loraine yesterday, I conclude?"

"Took leave, mamma!" was the startled answer.

"Yes,—for you are not likely to have an opportunity to-night,—and we owe him some thanks for the civility and attention he has shewn to us during our sojourn here. The young man has certainly improved; with years he may attain, perhaps, to that discretion, wisdom, and self-control,—in which

he showed himself last year so lamentably deficient."

Stella's head was bowed down over the work with which she had been quietly occupied when her mother opened this conversation. Perhaps it might have been to hide the smile her mother's grave strictures upon her lover's improvement—strictures, alas! she felt how little merited in the sense they were intended—had irresistibly provoked; perhaps the conscious air, with which, after an instant's hesitating pause, she murmured—

"But there is no need, mamma, for me to wish Mr. Loraine good-bye, we shall see him again so soon, at Florence."

"At Florence!" Mrs. Fitz-Henry exclaimed.

"Yes, he was to set out for Florence" (in a tone which tried to seem indifferent) "this morning." Another pause, during which Mrs. Fitz-Henry looked keenly at her daughter.

"Stella," she said, at length, very sternly, "I do not approve of all this."

"Of what, mamma?" Stella asked, just lifting up her eyes with a look of innocent

surprize. But Mrs. Fitz-Henry was not to be deceived: that very show of innocency only sharpened her suddenly-awakened suspicions.

“Of what! why, of that young man’s following us about in this manner from place to place. What has *he* to take him to Florence?—the rest of his party return homeward through Austria; why separate himself from their company? what reason can he possibly have for remaining thus behind?”

“Lord Duncan has invited him.”

“Lord Duncan; and what right has he to accept an invitation which will plunge him into all kinds of unjustifiable extravagance? A nobleman of Lord Duncan’s wealth and expensive habits is no fit companion for a youth whom I have ascertained from good authority to be wholly dependent on the very limited income of a widowed mother; foolish and ambitious enough, however, it would seem, to encourage and indulge him in society and in habits far beyond what his circumstances can justifiably admit. This concerns us not, certainly, but in kindness to the youth himself,

in whom I cannot but feel a degree of interest, I shall consider it my duty either to write or speak to Mr. Leveson, who appears altogether a sensible person, on the subject, and advise him as to the inexpediency of leaving his friend in Florence, exposed to the temptations and dangers which such a position must necessarily entail. Mr. Leveson seems to exercise a sort of influence over him, and to feel himself in a degree responsible for his well-doing. Yes," she continued, moving towards the writing-table, with an expression on her countenance her daughter knew well portended a suddenly-conceived, but no less unalterable determination, "I will write at once; it is but what I should wish any mother would do by me under similar circumstances."

But Stella was in an instant by her side, arresting her movements, by the quick nervous utterance of the following words:—

"You must not do it, mamma!"

"Must not do it! what do you mean, Stella?"

"I mean you must not write to Mr. Leveson, and tell him what you said just now."

“And why not, pray?”

“It will be of no use—Claud—Mr. Loraine, will not be brought back like an obedient child; he will be angry—offended at such interference; and, besides, what right has any one to interfere—to interpose; I mean what does it concern us, even if he is at Florence?”

Mrs. Fitz-Henry had kept her eyes fixed on her daughter's countenance as she spoke; had impatiently contemplated her crimsoned cheeks, and noted each agitated faltering accent of her voice. But at the last sentence, she laid down her pen, and with a somewhat cynical expression of countenance, and forced placidity of tone, exclaimed,—

“There you are right! what need have we, indeed, to interfere! It concerns us not, as you observe, even if he be at Florence! Let him remain; let him idle away his time and substance as he please!—only without our countenance; it shall not be again as it has been here!”

And, deliberately, Mrs. Fitz-Henry replaced the paper in its case.

But Stella still stood trembling.

“Mamma,” she at length murmured, something like desperate firmness struggling through the tremulous anxiety of her tone, “what do you mean?”

“I mean,” turning round upon the speaker with an expression of cold disdain, “that if we go to Florence, and Mr. Claud Loraine is there, the intercourse—(for I see no medium is to be maintained; and such idle intimacies being perfectly antagonistic to my system of things)—the intercourse here carried on between us, must entirely cease; as entirely as if it had never existed. You hear this, Stella; and you know, that when once I have spoken the word, and made up my mind upon a subject —”

She said no more; but the look which concluded this sentence was intended to express how more than the laws of the Medes and Persians that word, that resolution was unalterable in its decrees.

Yes, Stella had heard; and she did, or rather one year ago, would have known and felt how equally hopeless must be the attempt

to overthrow so impregnable a fortress as the maternal mandate, and have returned to her seat in silent, though it might be in sad submission.

But now she lingered; some tremulous resolution again lighting up her countenance, and giving a desperate firmness to the tone of voice in which, with hands tightly clasped together, she exclaimed,—

“Yes, mamma, I hear, I know! but—but if that is to be the case, it is of little use for *us* to go to Florence, for me to appear there on the stage to sing.”

“Stella! what do you mean?”

“What I say, mamma;—that to go to Florence and not see or speak to Claud—or worse, to see him, but to be forced to treat him as a stranger—would be for me to lose all voice, all power to sing, to act, or to distinguish myself in any manner; nay, a disgrace only should I prove, both to you and to myself. Oh! listen to me, mamma,” she continued, her desperate excitement subdued by the angry, indeed, fierce expression

with which Mrs. Fitz-Henry strove to conceal no small degree of inward trepidation and discomfiture ; and sinking on her knees by her mother's side, she raised her clasped hands and streaming eyes imploringly to her mother's face,—“ I do not mean to be undutiful, I do not wish to vex you, but I cannot longer conceal from you how Claud and I love one another ; we cannot help it, mamma ; it is our destiny ; we must ever do so. But why should this displease you ? it need not interfere with your wishes on my account. I know Claud is too young—too poor to marry yet ; we can wait for years, as long as ever you may wish ; we shall be content with loving each other as we do, with being allowed to be together whenever it is possible, as hitherto, and we may be often parted. This is all I ask. Oh, mamma, it will make me so happy ! and what has it been but happiness which has made me sing here so well ? But, mamma, if you separate us, if you forbid me to love Claud, I know, I feel, as I have said before, that I shall lose

my voice,—(oh! even after all this misery, how shall I be able to sing again?)—and not only my voice,—my health, my looks, my happiness. I shall pine away; I shall die.”

And Stella’s voice seemed, indeed, to fade like dying music, as her head sunk feebly on her mother’s arm, which, in her strong agony of supplication, she had clasped.

There was a pause.

“Stella, rise!” was all Mrs. Fitz-Henry said at its conclusion. “Go and lie down quietly upon that sofa for an hour. This scene, this excitement on your part has been most unnecessary. You know, my child, that all my desire is for your happiness and welfare. There, I will leave you for a little while, to rest and compose yourself. I must see to the preparation of your dress for this evening.”

And Mrs. Fitz-Henry, kissing her daughter’s brow affectionately, but with a certain expression of anxious perturbation, left the room.

But Stella, in spite of her alarming prognostication, sang well that night, leaving a

splendid impression upon the minds of the people of Milan—and heard no more of dropping the acquaintance of Claud.

And so a brilliant season succeeded ; during which the young couple were suffered to proceed, as any two tacitly acknowledged lovers might have done under the same vague and uncertain terms and circumstances. Mrs. Fitz-Henry either closing once more her eyes to the position of affairs between them, or choosing to regard it in no more serious light than that in which she might have viewed the conduct of two children playing the same innocent and inconsequent part.

Claud Loraine was with them often as before, at home and abroad, quarrelling at times with Mrs. Fitz-Henry, when she attempted to draw too tightly the reins of domination, to which, in reward for her toleration, she expected him to submit, or when she fancied some symptom of insubordinate and rebellious influence to evince itself in her daughter's conduct ; otherwise, a tolerably amicable understanding was established between them.

Interested policy, indeed, might, in the first instance, have inclined Mrs. Fitz-Henry to this indulgence — policy induced not only by Stella's startling representations as to the effect contrary measures were calculated to produce,—but by perceiving, as time went on, how admirers whom she might have less power to withstand, would otherwise, most certainly, with more success have aimed to rob her of the jewel it was so much her object to preserve, and who were kept at bay by the engagement the world concluded must subsist between Stella and himself, seeing the favour shown by the jealous mother to the handsome, engaging youth.

As to the attachment of the beautiful prima donna for the fortunate young Lorraine, that was beyond all question; none other could win more than a few passing rays of the general sunshine which her presence ever suffused around—not even the invincible Lord Duncan, though he exerted every endeavour, every energy, to win for himself some more particular regard.

But how did the case in reality stand with Mrs. Fitz-Henry ? Did this cold policy, in which her indulgence at first originated, long remain inviolate ? or, did it not insensibly give place to other influences ?

Yes, Claud would have felt himself fully avenged for past injuries, could he have discerned the manner in which he was secretly winding himself round the heart of the stern mother of his beloved. How, by degrees, the prospect, however remote—and remote it was desirable it should be, of one day calling that bright creature her son—began insensibly to form itself, associated with much pleasurable feeling in her mind ; and that, independent of any desire she might otherwise feel for the happiness of her daughter, but for her own selfish gratification.

Therefore, it was, though to all outward appearance she gave the subject no apparent attention or regard, that any thing which might either through himself or others reach her ears, bearing favourable relation to the young man's interests or concerns, was taken hold of

with avidity, to be pondered anxiously in her heart; and, most particularly, those hints let fall by the young man, respecting the fair chance he had of coming "into something good" at the death of a very rich old friend, who had always testified towards him the most particular interest, and, with the exception of the Pierreponts, possessing no other relations or tie. And thus the Florence season was drawing to an end, and with its close came what startling and unexpected news to our hero!

CHAPTER III.

A LETTER arrived from his mother, containing tidings of Mr. Fordyce's death—of his having left the bulk of his property to Blanche—to himself, also, a considerable portion, annexed to certain conditions, the particulars of which the mother considered it prudent to suppress; at the same time as she urged his immediate return to England to be a matter of the utmost necessity.

This announcement excited a great conflict of feelings in Claud's mind; the first of them instinctively selfish, made his heart bound with a thrill of joyful relief. Mercenary he was not; so that the good old man had chosen to

leave so large a portion of his fortune to poor ugly Blanche, caused him no pang of envy or regret. A considerable share would do for him—make him, at least, comfortable and independent for the future—(not that he had seemed ever to trouble himself much with anxiety upon the subject of that horrid bugbear expense, or, rather, we should say economy); whilst, at the same time, it would retrieve him from those present pecuniary embarrassments, in which it is unnecessary to say he found himself by this time pretty considerably involved, and deliver him from those qualms of conscience, which, at times, had disagreeably visited him, with reference to the injury which his reckless extravagance might produce upon his indulgent and affectionate mother. But then, the necessity of an immediate return to England, on which his mother so strenuously insisted. To leave Italy—to part from Stella in this sudden and unexpected manner. The idea filled him with anguish and dismay, anguish of a more desperate and passionate nature than the circumstance seemed to warrant.

For what if he did go to England, might he not return? and why, too, was a vague sentiment of anxious feeling excited by the idea of those "certain conditions" to which his mother alluded?

Shortly after the receipt of this letter, he was on his way to seek for Stella. It was evening, and, fortunately, not an opera night. He was to meet and walk with Mrs. Fitz-Henry and her daughter in the Boboli Gardens. There he found them, Mrs. Fitz-Henry deeply engaged in conversation with a professional, who had also by appointment joined her there to talk over business.

Thus he was able to draw Stella aside, and to her private ear first make known the grievous announcement that they must part, and that even on that very evening, for his departure must be immediate.

They sat together on the steps which lead down to the gardens below; for soon without design, but in the absorption of their mutual feelings, they had wandered away in another direction, and lost sight of their companions;

still, burning, and cloudless, the day, and the skies were truly Italian. "The bells of the numerous churches," as an author has described a similar scene, "it being a festival, were all in motion, and came mellowed up the heights, note below note, most enchantingly bringing with it a feeling of calm, more than belongs to silence."

The influence seemed to have been not without its power over those two young passionate hearts as they sat there upon the steps talking in a low voice, their hands clasped in one another's.

No one was in sight, to watch, or blame them. Stella's face it is true was pale, and at times bowed down sorrowfully on her bosom; yet still, when lifted up to meet her lover's, her countenance beamed bright and star-like, full of hope, and trust, upon his darker mood.

"And you will come again," her sweet voice might be heard to murmur, "as soon as ever you are able. The time will seem very long and tedious whilst you are away; but the ex-

pectation of your return will help to make me bear the trial ; it will be hard, I fear, to sing, and act, during your absence ; but, for all our sakes, I must try not to vex and distress mamma, by any weakness on my part ; and you too, Claud, have a mother, duty and affection towards whom will support and check your sorrow ; it is very selfish of me not to think more of the happiness she will feel at your return ; yes," she added more thoughtfully, " your mother, and all your other friends."

" Oh, Stella ! do not hate me—but I cannot think with pleasure, even of my mother at this moment ; and as for other friends, what are any other friends on earth to me ?"

" The Pierreponsts," she suggested.

" Ah, Mrs. Pierrepont, and poor ugly Blanche."

" Poor ugly Blanche," repeated Stella smiling playfully through her tears, " is very rich now."

Stella's interest in the Pierreponsts had been much excited at the time, by the grief which

Ethel's death had occasioned Claud. She had never wearied in drawing from him every particular concerning them ; had read with interest the letters which Claud, on his first coming abroad, had received from the three girls, and which, after Ethel's death, he had produced for her gratification.

The strong, though humble devotion expressed in Blanche's childish effusion, particularly impressed her ; and when Claud had spoken slightly of the author, as a little dark, ugly, or rather, now, a tall awkward girl (quite different from her sisters), with whom he used to fight, and quarrel, and bully, when they were children—Stella's sympathy had been immediately enlisted on her behalf. She reproved Claud for his ingratitude, shewing him how much more, by the style of her letters, she appeared to love him than the other two.

This Claud did not dispute—he believed she was affectionate—she was a good girl too, now, though a terribly passionate creature when a child ; but no warmer expressions in

her favour, Stella's representations had power to extort.

Of Rose's marriage she had subsequently heard, and not without a certain sentiment of relief, had received the tidings, for something or another in Claud's relation to those sister friends had at times vaguely troubled her.

But what had she to fear from Blanche, "poor ugly Blanche," towards whom her heart from the first inclined with indulgent pity, such as she would have felt for any creature having the misfortune to love Claud, as from his own careless accounts poor Blanche seemed to have done, without winning a return?

"Poor ugly Blanch is rich now."

The words were spoken lightly — "Was there any sudden shadow of presentiment darkening her spirit at the time?"

"Yes, rich, Stella. But what of that; what will her riches be to me?" Claud enquired, with almost angry solicitude. "Do you think that this will have power to make her more loveable, more beautiful in my eyes?"

"You should not think so much of beauty," murmured Stella, clasping her hands over her face with a gesture of graceful consciousness, as if she would hide the loveliness on which his eyes were then resting with such painful delight.

"Then I must never think of you, Stella," suddenly straining her to his heart. "Oh! beautiful one, I cannot leave you! Why, why, why, cannot we go together? your love is not equal to my own, or nothing—nothing, even now, would part us."

But Stella did not think it necessary to answer this desperate exordium; but gently extricated herself from his embrace, and again weeping, reverted to the prospect of his speedy return, as the sole available topic of relief and consolation.

Claud was forced also to return to the same vague melancholy alleviation. But all this time there was no mention or allusion made to any particular object of that return, of any event which was then to take place, which would obviate for the future any such ago-

nizing separation as the present ; and this, in after-days, formed a kind of excuse, with which the unhappy young man would strive to ease his conscience of a part of its heavy weight.

Satisfied, indeed, as he had been, for the time, by the delight of Stella's constant companionship and presence — too well aware of the unfitness of his circumstances for such a step as marriage—Claud had become content to view that event in the distant, uncertain light Mrs. Fitz-Henry had assigned it, and in which Stella had submissively acquiesced.

But now the interview is at an end. Both rose quickly, as Mrs. Fitz-Henry, still accompanied by the professor, who, however, on coming in sight of the truants, bowing, takes his leave, is seen approaching,—her countenance bearing no slight signs of darkness and displeasure.

But Claud's agitated explanation, accompanied by a renewal of Stella's tears, interrupted the expression of any such feelings ; and she entered with anxious interest into his

hurried relation, as to the circumstances of his sudden departure ; and though she silently listened to his protestations of a speedy return, did not discourage the idea. She told him also of her own plans. Rome was their intended destination during the autumn and winter. Those for the succeeding spring were at present undecided ; but she was not at all sure that it might not find them in England.

A few hours of melancholy enjoyment at their home, and then came the bitter parting,—one full of peculiar agony to the young lovers,—one long sorrowful embrace, with which Mrs. Fitz-Henry had no heart to interfere,—and Claud Loraine rushed distractedly through the streets to prepare for his journey. Much preparation, indeed, was needed, ere he could leave Florence. His debts were frightful to contemplate ; there was nothing to be done, but to endeavour to borrow money on the strength of his legacy ; for the sum his mother had imagined sufficient for the purpose of travelling expenses, was

a mere drop in the sea: a fraction, under his present circumstances. However, young Loraine was a general favourite; his connections were well known, and his expectations now so good, a sufficient sum was soon made up for him. The rich Lord Duncan was most kind and liberal upon the occasion, and through these friendly means he was enabled to leave Florence, which otherwise would have been quite out of the question.

* * * *

For some time after this event, the prima donna of la Scala was pronounced to be decidedly out of voice. Indeed, at a concert given by Lord Duncan, she quite broke down, to Mrs. Fitz-Henry's infinite mortification, in the middle of her most exquisite performance of the beautiful ballad—

“ My mother bids me bind my hair,
With bands of rosy hue;
Tie up my sleeves with ribbons rare,
And lace my boddice blue”—

—his lordship's especial favourite.

The occurrence being rendered only the more distressing, as the knowing part of the audience significantly excused the misadventure, making it evident that they deemed the departure of the young Loraine to be in no small degree connected with the scene.

But Lord Duncan was most delicate and considerate, managing so well to cover the confusion, and divert public attention, that Stella was able afterwards to retrieve her character in her mother's eyes, by the scientific performance of a most difficult aria; but which probably touched no heart so powerfully, or left so vivid an impression on the minds of any of her hearers as that which had been produced upon them by the faltering thrills, finally choked by sobs, where-with she had given only too natural expression to the innocent complaint of the mourning village maiden for her absent swain.

“ For why she cries—sit down and weep,

Whilst others dance and play :—

Alas ! I scarce can go, or creep,

While Lubin is away.”

CHAPTER IV.

It is an evening in September at Glendee, a small but picturesque estate in Scotland, formerly the property of Mr. Fordyce, and now the temporary abode of his heiress, into whose possession it had fallen.

The young and fortunate proprietress—there she stands alone, gazing anxiously in her mirror. She has been dressed in white with the greatest care and attention, red ribbons in her hair—her most becoming toilette—by the hands of her faithful nurse; and as her eye lights up with sudden thought, and the flush of eager feeling reddens her cheek, her heart bounds gladly, for she fancies that

she looks almost handsome—that even *he* may think her so—and in a flutter of nervous and expectant pleasure, she turns to go down stairs into the drawing-room, to join the rest of the expecting party, consisting of her mother and Mrs. Loraine, Sir James Rowley and Mr. Shaw, both former schoolfellows of Claud, who had been invited to enjoy the grouse shooting, so sedulously preserved for the present occasion. Miss Shaw, the sister of the latter gentleman, was also there, Mrs. Loraine having suggested that she would be a pleasant companion to Blanche, and assist to amuse the baronet, with whom, indeed, she had immediately struck up a violent flirtation.

There they were all assembled waiting—dinner having been put off for half-an-hour—uncomfortable enough, some from hunger, some from mental disquiet,—but he, the long-expected, does not arrive; and they are forced, at length, in consideration of the guests, to sit down to table without him, Mrs. Loraine looking terribly annoyed, Mrs. Pierrepont a little hurt and offended. Even the spirits of

the strangers were in some degree constrained by the effect this non-arrival had produced on their entertainers.

But Blanche—poor Blanche! where had flown the passing radiance of her cheek and eye? the consequent good looks on which Mrs. Loraine had whispered encouraging congratulations on her appearance in the drawing-room, thereby greatly adding to the favourable effect.

Alas! how is her countenance changed by the time the dining-room lamp shone down upon it! Poor girl! her's was a face to which feelings of a painful nature added not to the charm, to which the sickness of hope deferred, the pangs of disappointment and mortification were productive of effects of no becoming character!

And now, on this trying occasion, her countenance might be said not only to darken, but to "gather blackness" to a degree, which all the red and white of her toilette had no power to relieve; and Mrs. Loraine, struck by the change, and feeling anxiety, almost amounting

to despair of a very different nature excited in her breast, began almost to hope that her son would not arrive, at any rate, at so unfavourable a moment.

Her hope is not in vain—dinner is over. The young men, quite aware of the circumstances of the case, having laughed over their wine at this lagging lover, the young baronet advising Mr. Shaw to try his chance with the heiress, in spite of her black looks, have, at length, joined the ladies in the drawing-room, yet no Claud Loraine makes his appearance; and this is not the first, or the second time that he has been as vainly expected. What had kept him at all from following his mother immediately, as she had announced was his intention on her coming into Scotland a fortnight ago, was a mystery. However, on this occasion, the arrival had been considered quite certain; and even Mrs. Loraine's attempted excuses on the subject are lame and embarrassed.

The party separate. Blanche tears out her ribbons, and goes to bed in a state of dark

despondency, only murmuring, in a tone of concentrated despair, "He will never come!" as nurse Lea bends soothingly over her, to give her parting nightly kiss.

It is, indeed, more than two months since Claud Loraine has returned to England; and his mother, ready in London to receive him, after a separation of more than two years, has clasped, with tremulous delight, her beloved son in her arms.

Then how anxiously, how tenderly, she breaks to him the particulars of Mr. Fordyce's will, concerning which he so eagerly inquired; with what delicate tact she reveals to his startled ear the conditions on which his legacy depends, forbearing to expostulate, when he starts from his seat with a passionate exclamation of disgust and disappointment; for, of course, this reported legacy, tied by such conditions, melts immediately into air, becomes at once invalid and nugatory in his eyes.

"Mother, why not tell me this at once? Why bring me post haste to England on this fool's errand? and you say he has left me nothing—not a farthing independent?"

"Yes, Claud, five thousand pounds, the sum he has also bequeathed to Harry Pierrepont and Rose Spencer."

Claud clapped his hand to his heated brow, and paced the room impetuously.

This was, indeed, a blow; that sum was, indeed, a nothing when compared to what he had counted upon,—with what, indeed, his mother had informed him was conditionally allotted to him.

What was to become of him—his debts—his involvements!

His mother, at length, arrested his footsteps.

"Dear Claud, come and sit down by me," she said. "Let us talk calmly over this business. Tell me, why should you object so violently to the idea of marrying Blanche?"

"Why?" was the vehement reply, as he stood still before his mother, with eyes flashing fierce, passionate surprise at the question, "why? for every reason under heaven!"

"The idea comes upon you unexpectedly," Mrs. Loraine continued, in the same strain.

"You have not seen her for more than two years; you remember her as almost a child, and one not particularly attractive. She is quite grown up now, and you have no idea how improved in looks. Some day, mark my words, she will be a very handsome woman, and is already clever and amiable in the extreme. Her remembrance of you is full of the most tender devotion. She rejoices in her fortune only as it is to be the means of contributing to your happiness and welfare; and then, my dear Claud," as her son again started away with only a greater degree of indignant aversion expressed in his look and gesture, "another reason is, if you do not marry Blanche, *what is to become of you?*"

"Become of me—what do you mean?" he exclaimed, turning upon Mrs. Loraine with an expression of fierce defiance, though he but too well divined the purport of her words.

"My dear boy, you must guess pretty well the state of our finances!"

Then, stung by this implied reproach, which his conscience only made him too quick to

appropriate, Claud gave vent to his feelings in a burst of passionate invectives against his evil fate—the curse of poverty, the capriciousness of fortune, nay, the injustice, the wickedness of Mr. Fordyce's will—his astonishment that his mother should have the cold-blooded worldliness to contemplate for one moment his compliance with it to be possible.

“And why not?” Mrs. Loraine again with soothing gentleness demanded.

“Why, why? Why, if you wish to know, mother, besides every other most sufficient reason, there is another weightier still. I will tell you at once—that I love—that my whole heart, my every affection, is entirely and irrevocably given to another.”

“To an opera singer,” was Mrs. Loraine's calm, though grave reply; for it must not be supposed that the mother had remained all the time in total ignorance of her son's continental proceedings, or that she was not fully prepared for a similar avowal.

Indeed, it was in a great measure owing to the intelligence she had gleaned from Mr.

Levison on the subject of Claud's intimacy with the Fitz-Henrys, and her anxiety to put an immediate end to the affair, which had prompted her sending him so hurried and precipitate a recal.

"Yes, an opera singer," reiterated Claud, defiantly, though he started at first, his face all crimson at his mother's words. "An opera singer, if so you please to call her."

"But, my dear Claud, is she *not* an opera singer?" said Mrs. Loraine, half smiling.

"Yes," stammered the young man. "Yes, certainly; did I say she was not?"

"No, you did not; but, my dear Claud, though she may be very charming, very talented, in your position, is it possible that you can ever marry such a person?"

"It is, however, my intention some day or another to marry Stella Fitz-Henry, and no one else," Claud murmured, moodily.

"My dear son," assuming a determined, yet still gentle tone, "that is impossible. Should you, even my only son, the only hope and comfort of my life, for whom I have made

every sacrifice, determine to destroy for ever my peace, my only hope of happiness, by so degrading a proceeding, such a marriage, indeed, on every account, would be an utter impossibility. Go and ask Gregson—go and examine into the state of our money affairs (a state I will leave it to your conscience to say how brought about, though not for one moment would I reproach you), and you will see how we stand. On the other hand, consider, what you reject with such ignominy—ease, comfort, affluence, independence for life; and procured through what means?—a young, amiable, most affectionate, and devoted wife. I do not say that it may not cost you the destruction of some very strongly excited feelings; we have all had our first loves, dear Claud, and can sympathize with your present infatuation. And it is not either as if you were called upon to marry, for the sake of her money, some strange girl in whom you had hitherto been totally uninterested—but Blanche, your old companion and familiar friend, bound to you by so many ties of happy

early memory and association. But we will speak of this no more at present ;" putting her hand before his mouth to arrest some fresh burst of passionate resistance from her listener, whom she could but hope one quarter of a degree subdued by her persuasive rhetoric.

Yet soon must she be convinced that it is not by such means, that fiery will, that wayward spirit is to be brought to bow under the yoke of circumstances ; other influences must assert their power to lessen his impressions of the past, and reconcile him to the hated idea of the present.

Therefore it was that Mrs. Loraine prudently relinquished every endeavour to effect an immediate meeting with Blanche ; suffered weeks to elapse, during which the young man recklessly plunged into the society of the young and dissipated set by whom he was speedily surrounded, into the excitement of Goodwood races, and other amusements of the same ruinous character, till August wore away, and the shooting at Glen-dee was wasting or expended

on others, for whom it had not been so carefully preserved. And Claud lost more money, was become more and more entangled in a maze of perplexity, more and more desperate, more callous, but at the same time more under the influence of the principles pretty current in the world in which he was moving, that to marry an heiress, with feelings towards her of indifference, nay, of aversion, with every affection of his heart and soul given to another, particularly in a case like his, a case with which every one was very generally acquainted, was by no means so preposterous or impossible an alternative, but an expedient, a necessity, dire as that necessity might be, to which many a better man than himself must often find himself obliged to have recourse.

And thus it was, though still with the most ungracious expression of repugnance to the whole transaction, that Claud Loraine, finally yielding to the dire necessity of the case, allowed his mother to repair to Scotland, with the understanding that he would follow, in order to see Blanche; and if he found it *pos-*

sible, he promised then to make the necessary proposal for her hand. And yielding to the same principle, stifling, as much as he was able, every compunctious visiting of heart and conscience, Mrs. Loraine had put a remarkably good face upon the matter, and went to prepare the way for the golden sacrifice. The Spartan mothers of old, without a sigh or a tear, could see, it is said, their warrior sons carried home cold and dead upon their shields. Are those of our acquaintance less Spartan in their heroism, who can see the hearts and happiness of their children wounded and laid low upon the glittering shield of some great worldly interest or advancement?

CHAPTER V.

AND thus it was, that after keeping the party at Glendee for many a day on the anxious look-out for his arrival, waiting and expecting, and again and again being disappointed, Claud, who in the mean time had been putting off from hour to hour the evil moment, and had been lingering at friends' houses on the way, drops down suddenly upon them just when he was not looked for, late one afternoon, before the party assembled in the drawing-room had retired to dress for dinner.

And there he stands—when from the bustle and confusion attendant on his first arrival he

has escaped impatiently—a little aloof from the rest, in his proud and glorious beauty; so at least it appeared to more than one amongst the group, in the midst of whom he seems to have descended suddenly, like one of the rebel spirits banished from a higher sphere; giving but short ungracious answers to the questions and remarks addressed to him by his mother, or his friends; his eye at the same time flashing a kind of haughty, sullen defiance around him, as if he fancied all present must, in some manner or another, be implicated in the distasteful plot in which he had been ensnared.

Whilst Blanche—poor Blanche!—shrinking, overpowered, half fainting with the weight of her trembling emotion, and whose timidly extended hand had been at first but slightly shaken in common greeting with the rest—receives no other sign of kindness from her old friend and playmate—her intended husband—no further notice or regard.

Not, indeed, till Mrs. Loraine, as if to remind him of a neglected duty, compelled her

son's attention towards Blanche, by somewhat pointedly pronouncing her name in the course of conversation.

Then, indeed, his eyes turn and rest upon the dark, pale girl—darker and even less lovely than usual, through excess of feeling—and whose appearance on this occasion no careful and becoming evening toilet had ministered to relieve.

His eye, indeed, rests for a moment upon her, as if for the first time conscious of her identity, but with no flattering signs of recognition—nay, with somewhat of his old scornful disgust, when as a boy he used to be, after an absence, struck by the young girl's childish ugliness—turns away, and begins to talk with careless unconcern to Sir James Rowley and Mr. Shaw ; whilst the ladies, having received very little encouragement to linger, withdrew, unnoticed, to dress for dinner.

Poor Blanche !—is there not a blank, sore feeling at your heart, as you don your white robe and rose-coloured ribbons to-night for this long expected guest.

* * * * *

But at dinner his mood has changed. The influence of light, luxury, wine, an excellent *chef de cuisine*, combined with pleasant company, work wonders; and Claud is in excellent spirits, seated by the side of Blanche, whom, however, he has scarcely occasion to address, for the small party makes the conversation general, he talks and laughs with a gaiety and ease, which though it might appear somewhat strained and unnatural to those who knew him well, fascinated and delighted at any rate the strangers of the party.

By the time the ladies had left the dining-room, Sir James had considerably sunk in the estimation of Miss Shaw. She looked upon Mr. Loraine as the most charming—the handsomest person she had ever seen—and does not know whether most to envy or to pity Blanche, towards whom as yet she has not seen him bestow one lover-like look, or even friendly demonstration. Mrs. Loraine, in the mean time, exerts herself to keep up Blanche's spirits, and to soothe a certain degree of unpleasant surprise, she sees is excited in Mrs.

Pierrepont's mind with regard to Claud's conduct and demeanour. Again, too, her friend expatiates, as she has taken care to do before, on Claud's delicate scruples concerning his marriage with Blanche; his repugnance to the idea being entertained of his marrying her merely for her fortune, and the consequent shyness towards her this feeling must at first naturally produce, an effect which would certainly wear off after a few days' renewed intercourse. Mrs. Pierrepont was too willing to be satisfied on this point; and then when the gentlemen rejoined them in the drawing-room, Claud, his conscience a little reproaching him, perhaps, for previous neglect, sat down by Mrs. Pierrepont's side, and entered into conversation with her, at first with something of the same conscious constraint, but as he proceeded, and the subject turned upon his dear old friends, her children in India, his heart cannot but warm and soften towards the mother of the beautiful Ethel and Rose, the gentle lovely woman whom even as a child he had so much admired, and

loved as much as his spoilt selfish boyhood had been capable of attaching itself to any one, and upon whose faded brow was now so plainly to be read the one more great sorrow which had visited her since last they parted.

And it is under the influence of this better mood that Claud turns at length and addresses himself kindly to Blanche, who, seated at the same table, but a little apart, had been only too happy to see him devote himself so amiably to her mother, and to be able in the meanwhile to fix her eyes for the first time with any power of calm observation upon his face, a face whose beauty she now beholds so far above any image her fondest imagination had portrayed during the years they had been parted, that her heart was soon dancing with a giddy joy, a reckless exultation at the mere possibility of that bright being ever standing towards her in the relation that was intended, irresponsible even as his own feelings might be; and thus, excited by those inward reflections, looking "almost handsome" again

under the happier influence they impart, she is able to receive the advances Claud now makes with some tolerable amount of outward self-possession; and though their attempts at being at ease with one another must needs be considerably interfered with by a degree of embarrassed consciousness, they were progressing favourably enough, when Blanche, by way of starting some subject of individual interest to her companion, asked him simply if he had not very much enjoyed himself in Italy; then Claud started as if a serpent had stung him, coloured violently, made some hasty, incoherent answer, and murmuring something about the heat, pushed back his chair, and gazed impatiently in another direction. But Mrs. Loraine, who is ever on the anxious watch, seeing that something has come across the smooth surface of affairs, thinks it better to effect a diversion by proposing music.

This was not the most politic measure she could have adopted, not of a piece with this lady's usual discriminating tact, but it was the first idea which suggested itself to her mind

in this emergency. She was immediately supported by others of the party, and Blanche is called upon to sing.

Poor girl! she rises nervously; she had been practising her singing with anxious diligence of late, aided a little by the instructions of her mother, for she remembers how fond Claud had ever been of music, and she intends having lessons of a good master at the first opportunity. Her voice is rather a good contralto, but indeed requires great cultivation and good teaching; for Mrs. Pierrepont, though she used to possess herself the sweetest of voices, never professed any great degree of scientific proficiency, and was, alas! no second Mrs. Fitz-Henry in the art of tuition.

But still Blanche found her singing sufficiently appreciated to give her courage to hope it might find some favour in Claud's esteem.

Indeed, she did not sing worse than the generality of young ladies of her age and circumstances; and besides, poor girl, though a vague general idea did strike her mind as to

all the good music Claud must have heard in Italy, she had no remote conception as to the extent or manner to which his critical powers had been sharpened ; how, on his very heart-strings every sound rings false, every note discordant, after the singing—the singer to whom he had been accustomed to listen. But you, unwary Mrs. Loraine, you so much better informed upon the subject, how could you hazard such an experiment ?

Already Blanche, by her mention of Italy, has conjured up a distracting vision of lost beauty and delight ; and now, at the word singing, though it was a relief to him that Blanche rises to depart, he sinks his face into his hands, groaning inwardly. And Blanche, she begins to sing the old Jacobite song—

“ Bonnie Prince Charlie ! ”

particularly selected for her performance on this interesting occasion.

But at the first sound of her voice, the groan becomes almost audible. Claud starts,

for it is a sound, which, by its contrast with those siren strains once heard mingling with the Alpine waterfall, jars upon his every sense and feeling, appears like a hideous mockery of the singing, which had so often caused him to hide his face whilst he listened, to conceal the ecstatic emotions, otherwise too plainly revealed upon his countenance, which the music of that voice inspired.

True, Blanche does not even sing her best to-night. She feels with too much intensity, poor girl! the nervous, long-expected pleasure of singing before Claud,—this song, too, which she had so sedulously prepared to welcome him, —her anxiety to sing well. Her voice is burdened with emotion, and like her countenance, from a similar cause, suffers in consequence. Yet the others listen with tolerable satisfaction, and praise, at its conclusion, both the song and the singing, smiling a little in their own imaginations at the somewhat ludicrous applicability of the closing verse,—

“Oh, ye ha been lang a-coming, lang a-coming,
Oh, ye ha been lang a-coming, Bonnie Royal Charlie !”

Poor Blanche ! she ceases, and Claud's face is still bowed down within his hands ; but her strains have long ceased to move him either to pleasure or to pain ; perhaps he had contrived, under shelter of the attitude he had assumed, to lull his offended sense of hearing, for he heard no more after the first astounding commencement—

“ His ears are with his heart, and that is far away ! ”

Mrs. Loraine speaks to him, he starts, and finds that it is over.

Mrs. Pierrepont asks him who were the best singers he had heard in Italy, and he mutters over several Italian names hurriedly.

Blanche is requested to sing another song, an Italian one ; during the performance of which, Claud walks deliberately to the other end of the room, and engages Sir James Rowley in conversation. Blanche must hope for no more notice or attention from him that night.

* * * * *

Rest and slumber do not seem to have done much towards the improvement of the young man's state of feeling the next morning.

He comes down stairs when the early breakfast prepared for the convenience of the sportsmen is nearly over, assumes a careless indifference with regard to shooting, demurs whether he shall go out at all that day ; nevertheless, finally sets off, seeing there is nothing better to be done, stays out till late, and returns only in time to dress for dinner.

Pleasantly elated and excited by the success of his day's sport, he compliments Blanche on her good shooting, the well appointed arrangements of dogs, guns, and keepers, and goes altogether through the ordeal of the evening, singing and all, with tolerable credit and decorum. Thus several days pass on. The stranger guests are replaced by others of Claud's own inviting, for he has *carte blanche* in that respect as in every other department.

Indeed, he already feels himself possessed of all power and authority at Glendee, looked up to by his friends and visitors, as the source and

dispenser of the luxuries and pleasures by which they are surrounded, and carried away by the enjoyment of the new position, he almost forgets at times his conditional tenure by which he at present holds it, and what it is incumbent on him to do ere he can become other than—

“ The painted shadow of a King !”

Or he remembers it but too keenly, and then matters proceed but still more slowly ; for the careless disregard which generally marked his deportment towards Blanche, now gave place to such coldness and marked avoidance, that Mrs. Loraine was in despair lest Mrs. Pierrepont would conclude that all idea of his marrying her daughter was at an end ; and Blanche herself, though she strove to hide with instinctive womanly dignity of mind as much as possible her mortified feelings, was wretched—wretched to discover how impossible it was to gain Claud’s love, whilst every day and hour she passed in his bright presence, made the fulfil-

ment of Mr. Fordyce's will, regarding him, the object of her heart's more passionate desire. And then Mrs. Loraine took such care to impress her mind with the proud and delicate scruples entertained by her son respecting Blanche's fortune.

Oh ! if she had only courage to tell him, how worthless that would be to her if she shared it not with him. But she had *not* courage, and certainly Claud gave her but little opportunity for any such delicate communication,—indeed, so unpromising became the state of affairs established between them, that Mrs. Loraine thought it high time to interfere.

CHAPTER VI.

"My dear Claud," his mother said one day, having called him to her dressing-room, "do you know that you have been here more than a month?"

"Well"—throwing himself upon a chair, as if recklessly prepared for a lecture, "I am pretty well aware of that circumstance."

"You seem, however, to forget the purpose and object of your coming."

"Forget it!" in an impatient tone and excited manner, "would to heaven that I could. But, I suppose," he added, after a pause, during which Mrs. Loraine seemed to wait

for him to proceed, "I was not expected to propose all in an instant."

"No, certainly ; but if you intend to do so at all, a little preparation at least is necessary. I mean that it would be advisable for you to pay Blanche a little more attention than at present you bestow upon her. Your intimate acquaintance from a child—the brother and sister terms on which you have been accustomed to regard each other, may render any loverlike feeling or conduct, on your part, at first, somewhat difficult, but I am certain a very little more intimate acquaintance with Blanche as she now is, would discover to you in her a much greater amount of attractions than you have any idea she possesses, quite sufficient, I am sure, to win any man's warmest affections. Begin only by being more brother-like in your manner ; forget, if possible, how you are at present situated towards one another. Blanche's real good qualities, especially her devoted attachment to yourself, ought to claim at least your regard, and prompt you to treat her with kindness and consideration, more as the Blanche of

other days, whom, though you often teased and quarrelled with, I am sure in your heart you were always inclined to appreciate."

"Was I?" Claud replied, with bitter irony. "My appreciation, as far as I can remember, was not shown forth in the most agreeable or flattering manner. You wish me to treat her as I used to do in former days? Oh! that it were possible," he exclaimed, starting from his chair, and pacing the room with passionate and impatient strides, "that I could tell her at once how I hate—how I detest her." And he clenched his hands, his eyes flashing with somewhat of that half real, half affected fury with which, in his boyish fits of angry tyranny, he used to emphasize his ire against his offended or offending playmate. "That—that, at least, would put an end to this horrible affair, for, I suppose, she would not wish to marry me under those circumstances."

"Claud! you talk foolishly; this affair, as you call it, is in your own hands, not Blanche's. It is for you to put an end to it, if you feel your acquiescence so impossible, so repugnant.

Far be it from me in such a case to press on you a marriage, to the idea of which you entertain so insuperable an aversion."

And there was deep disappointment mingled in the tone of resignation with which Mrs. Loraine said these words.

Her son seemed in a degree softened.

"Mother, if it were not that my affections were engaged—if I did not think that the happiness of another besides myself was so materially concerned, I should, of course, be anxious to meet your wishes, to comply with old Fordyce's stupid directions on the subject, and try to feel towards Blanche (who, I dare say, is every thing you describe her to be) as one ought to do towards one's intended wife—a feeling, of course, a little difficult to get up on the spur of the moment."

"But you made no decided engagement with this singer, this Italian girl," Mrs. Loraine demanded a little fearfully, though revived by the sudden change of tone on her son's part.

"Italian girl! she is no Italian girl—as

much English as that creature Blanche herself. And, oh! mother, how beautiful—how bright—how pure and good! Oh! Stella—Stella!” And Claud laid his head on the table beside him, and groaned aloud.

Mrs. Loraine saw she had unwarily touched a tender chord of recollection; and, after a decent pause, began to speak of the plans which, in case of his giving up Blanche, it was necessary for them to adopt. Arrangements to be made for raising money, curtailment of present expense, the absolute necessity there would be for him, without any further delay, to fix upon some employment or profession, and every other alternative consequent on his altered position—all which propositions, the most unsuited to his taste and feelings, came very much like a chilly shower-bath upon the exalted ideas, and high-flown expectations of affluence and independence, connected with his possession of fifteen thousand a-year.

And truly, however much he might at first have recoiled from the conditions annexed to its attainment, Claud had by this time, in a

great measure, accustomed himself to regard a marriage with Blanche as his inevitable and necessary doom ; therefore, as his mother continued to discourse at some length on the same distasteful topic, viz., the obligations poverty invariably entails upon its victims, a process of a much more satisfactory nature, as far as her wishes were concerned, was going forward in her son's mind ; a struggle with not only the natural inclinations of his heart, but with what he considered the most magnanimous dictates of conscience, for thus he argued—

On the whole, which would he wrong the most, by consenting to this *mariage de convenance* in his present state of feeling, Blanche or Stella ? True, there might be extenuation on either ground. Mrs. Fitz-Henry had almost insultingly refused her consent to his marrying her daughter, when he made overtures to that effect ; was it not her own fault that no binding engagement now subsisted between them ?

Of Blanche's affection, was he not as much convinced as of Stella's ? Nay more, since in-

difference, nay, even aversion on his part, had had no power to divert it !

* * * * *

The effect of all these desperate considerations, though he did not make them then apparent to his mother, were quickly demonstrated in his altered conduct. He remained by Blanche's side throughout the whole evening; and though his mood was composed more or less of alternate fits of silent abstraction and forced excitement, even this bare show of lover-like devotion, thrilled the heart of the infatuated girl with palpitating delight,

“Etre avec celui qu'on aime — cela suffit rêver, lui parler, ne lui parler point, mais auprès lui—tout est égal.”

Such, with the sentimental Frenchman, we suppose to have been the opinion of poor Blanche; for to be near Claud, whether silent, noticed, or disregarded, was to her sufficient happiness.

The next was a cold wet day, a regular

Scotch mist, enveloping the outward world, and imparting its ungenial influence to the interior aspect of Glendee. None felt it so uncomfortably as Claud, spoilt as he was for a northern climate.

There were no strangers in the house, but he expected a friend or two that evening. He did not think of going out to shoot, but lay half the morning on a sofa in the library, his face buried in the cushions, whilst scenes and images in direct contradistinction to the aspect of every thing surrounding him—the memory, too, of which it was so particularly incumbent upon him at this juncture to annihilate—passed vividly before his mental vision.

Under more inauspicious circumstances, both inward and outward, than his present mood, could not the step he was desperately bringing himself to determine upon, have been taken. Claud did not go in to luncheon, but an hour or two after found himself wandering towards the drawing-room. Whether or not he had come thither with the purpose of taking the irrevocable plunge, he was, certainly, not

a little scared at beholding the opportunity so plainly presented to him.

On opening the door, there sat Blanche alone, bending over her embroidery frame. He paused, handle in hand, then turned, as if half meditating a retreat.

But Blanche looked up and saw him. Her eyes brightened perceptibly—a dark red flush suffused her cheeks—a nervous smile chased the look of heavy, dreary thought which had before distinguished it, irresistibly conjuring up before Claud's remembrance a vision of the dark dull pool at the Willows, in vivid contrast with the singing, sparkling waters of an Alpine fall, or the bright and golden flow of the Italian river, by which his fancy had been so lately haunted. But he saw that there was no retreat, that “now or never” was the order of his march; so, pushing the door desperately to, he advanced at once towards the embroideress.

There was a sofa standing just behind where she was seated, and throwing himself upon it, he remained for several moments watching in gloomy silence the movement

of Blanche's fingers, as again, with nervous diligence, she set herself to the task; her cheeks still flushed, her heart beating with conscious pleasure, caring little for his silence, feeling only too blest that he was near her—near her, as she remembered often to have seen him take up his position by the side of Ethel or Rose in his days of boyish admiration and devotion to those two fair sister-friends.

Poor innocent Blanche! could you but have seen how for months and days devotedly he had, and that more recently, been hovering near another, one too, how far more beautiful in his eyes and dearer to his heart—hanging entranced on the accents of a voice even at that moment lingering on his ear,—would you not have been at once aroused, and for ever awakened from your infatuated complacency?

Suddenly Claud starts up, puts his feet to the ground, pushes from his brow his disordered hair, and bringing himself in closer proximity to Blanche's chair, thus addresses her:—

“And so, Blanche, you and I are to be married to one another!”

Well might Blanche start, drop her needle and turn pale at this most abrupt and novel mode of entering upon a subject of such delicate and momentous import. Her head sunk upon her bosom, whilst her pale lips murmured, half deprecatingly,—

“Oh, Claud! that is as you choose; it depends entirely upon yourself.”

“As *I* choose! Oh, Blanche,” in a tone in which, though the words were humble, there sounded more of ironical bitterness—“in a case like ours, it is on you, the rich independent heiress, not upon a poor penniless fellow like myself that it depends; as far as I myself am concerned, I am ready to comply with our old friend’s bequest, and prom”—here something seemed to choke that word ere it was completed—“and hope to do my best to make you happy. But, as I said before, it rests entirely with yourself, Blanche, to decide; you know pretty well what I am: what sort of a husband I shall

make," he added, with real feeling, "God only knows."

There was no answer from Blanche but a low sob, and the yielding of her tremulous hand—a sob, the herald of a storm of passionate emotion, which, as on the occasion of the first reading of the codicil, seemed to shake her frame to its very centre.

Claud stood for a moment in cold silence, then relaxing his hold of the hand he had taken, turned away, and with a gesture of impatience—or was it of disgust?—rose and walked to the window; and here he stood with an expression of countenance not often to be seen, it is hoped, on the face of one under his peculiar circumstances.

Poor Blanche! you should have remembered that similar outbreaks of feeling on your part, never met with much tender sympathy from its present spectator; that he had often stood by in scornful or disgusted silence whilst you gave vent to your heart's fulness of joy, or sorrow, in tears or lamentations; and now he is chafing inwardly at an ebul-

lition he can neither compassionate or understand.

If she wished to marry him, what need to get up this disagreeable scene? was his ungracious commentary. And then, when the sobs having ceased, and the tears are staid, Claud slowly returns to her side, and Blanche uncovers her tear-stained face, a tremulous smile on her quivering lips, as she lifts up one timid glance at her *lover's* countenance; Claud half recoils, half drops the hand he has again taken, for the image of another countenance rises before his imagination. A face—a countenance which “even in sorrow was sweet”—whose attractive brightness no cloud of grief could dim, no mist of tears deface.

“Oh! Hesperus, his much-beloved,
His evening and his morning-star of love.”

* * * * *

Few, perhaps, when about to speak the last irrevocable words which seal their future

doom on such occasions, have not had some haunting vision of the past—

“Some fairy form, and ne’er forgot,
Which first-love traced”—

conjured up — to disturb, or cloud in a measure their present happiness; but on few, it is to be trusted, do similar reminiscences produce the same effect as on Claud Loraine at this moment.

But he puts a fierce effort over his feelings; and says, though in a tone hoarse and faltering, sufficiently in character with the occasion,

“Well, Blanche, I suppose I may consider that all is settled between us?”

Again struggling with a paroxysm of weeping, her pale lips murmured—

“Oh, Claud! if I *could* only make you happy, *it* is all—all I can desire.”

He hesitates; must he embrace her? no—not this time. Weeping, poor Blanche is so disfiguring to you. But as an alternative, in duty bound, he presses that trembling

hand to his lips, and —— their doom is sealed.

“ Ill might the youthful maiden brook,
To fix on his, her timid look ;
She only felt his lips had press'd
Her white hand—and hope told the rest.
Companion of her infancy,
Less than her friend how could he be ?
She did not mark the haughty glare
Which even now his look could wear ;
The lip of pride, as if disdained
The fond heart which yet his remained.”

CHAPTER VII.

"It was over," Mrs. Lea continued. "Blanche coming from her mother into her own room, where she found me working, threw herself into my arms, and told me the glad news. Yes, glad to her, though *my* heart fainted, and my lips would scarcely murmur the expected congratulations, when she assured me that Claud had spoken;—that she was to be his wife—that he was now with his mother speaking on the subject.

"Poor child! I had been sorely grieved for her all this time. From what I had both seen and heard, I was soon convinced that Mr. Claud loved her not; no, scarce even with

that brother-like attachment which might at least have given promise of some degree of happiness in case of their union ; but that either the compulsory position in which he had been placed towards her, or other circumstances which as yet we knew not of, had excited feelings almost amounting to repugnance in his breast. Yet, on the other hand, more and more I perceived how strongly were my child's hopes and present happiness concerned in the fulfilment of Mr. Fordyce's stipulations.

"I saw her ever since the young man's arrival growing paler and thinner every day ; her spirits and temper variable and uncertain, yet keeping anxious constraint over the mortified feelings of her heart, soon avoiding every allusion to the subject, either with her mother or myself ; that is to say, since the first, or rather second evening after Mr. Claud's return, when matters seemed to have gone on more favourably, and she told me, in answer to some half-playful, half-serious enquiries on my part concerning her former

playmate, that since she had seen how more than ever bright and fascinating he had become, she would rather die than not marry Claud! What then was I to wish for—hope, or fear?

“Alas! that one like Mr. Fordyce, who, during his life-time, had shewn such wise and tender consideration to promote the interest and happiness of those he loved, should thus at last, by an inconsiderate testament, have exposed them whom it concerned, to the uncertain reck and jeopardy of such a proceeding.

“But it is hard, indeed, to reconcile with our ideas of consistency all the foolish, unjust, and oftentimes unrighteous wills with which dead men startle or offend survivors,—wills which are frequently much more reconcilable with the character and expected intentions of the deceased than the one in question.

I have heard it remarked, that a man's true character never comes out until his will is opened; and certainly, often it is found to

contain an exposure of dispositions, feelings, passions, prejudices, which during a life-time had been kept artfully under restraint and disguise ;—a whole existence of hypocrisy, of smouldering revenge, is revealed, which bursts upon the survivors with surprised dismay, causing heart-rending disappointments to some, unlooked-for exultation to others : but in every case bringing with it painful impressions—heart-burnings, which cast a dark shadow over the memory of the dead.

But here, undoubtedly, everything had been done in the purest spirit of kindness and affectionate desire to promote the happiness and welfare of those two objects of his tender regard, as well, perhaps, as to satisfy a long-cherished secret project, the favourite scheme of his imagination.

Yet, could the most inveterate spirit of malice and enmity have better aimed its dart ?

Well, he is gone, and recks not of the bitter fruits of his unluckly plan. It was, indeed, for those he left behind to deplore it, and

to suffer all he surely would have felt in witnessing its fulfilment. But I must not thus look forward.

* * * *

Mr. Claud was with my lady—Mrs. Lorraine had left them together. She was much agitated during the interview. There was, of course, great anxiety mingled with her feelings of pleasure on the occasion.

Mrs. Pierrepont had loved her friend's son, from his earliest infancy, almost as her own, and could have desired nothing better than his union with her daughter; but her wishes could not blind her to the undisguised indifference, to use the mildest term, displayed by the young man towards Blanche.

Tearfully she therefore now spoke to him on the subject of their union, bade him remember that she was going away into a distant land, and committed her child to his sole guardianship and affection, exhorting him to pause and consider, for the sake of old me-

mories and associations, whether he felt equal to the trust.

Claud was affected; pressing the gentle mother's delicate hand to his lips with more fervour than ever he would feel towards the daughter, he murmured promises and assurances, with which she tried to feel content. Then Blanche was recalled, and Claud, without much violence to his feelings, in his now softened mood, kindly kissed his *fiancée* before her mother.

Mrs. Loraine soon joined the party, and in high delight talked over future plans till nearly dinner-time, to which meal Blanche went down, looking quite a different creature from the morning; so proud and happy, with such a bright colour on her cheeks, and light within her eyes, that Claud's friends who had arrived, and who had heard that she was plain, were quite surprised, declaring her to be really handsome; pronounced Claud a lucky fellow when he informed them carelessly of his engagement, and congratulating him

warmly on his good fortune, drank to the health of himself and his betrothed.

Claud, elated and excited, was quite lover-like and devoted in his attention to Blanche throughout the evening. It seemed indeed quite a relief to him, now that the step was really taken, lulling his conscience, as regarded the past, into a selfish slumber, and as for the present, putting himself to little trouble or doing little violence to his feelings in playing his required part.

After the first day or two, indeed, he became gradually on much the same unscrupulous terms with his betrothed as in days gone by. But this was partly Blanche's own fault, so completely did she encourage by an anxious subserviency, rather out of place in one in her position, this equally unseemly deportment on his part. But it was such delicious happiness to Blanche to wait upon, and watch his every look and gesture ; anticipate each desire and inclination of his wayward and capricious will ; that even the little incivilities and rebuffs she soon began to meet with in

this labour of love, had something in them which at first thrilled her with a species of delight.

The very morning after their engagement Claud rushed back into the hall where Blanche with Mrs. Loraine had been attending the departure of the shooting party, desiring to have some part of his accoutrement repaired he had discovered to be broken ; and Blanche, who was now lingering there alone, offered to officiate, ran for her work-box, and sat herself to the task with eager, anxious haste.

But the pleasure of being thus employed for Claud, he too standing over her the while, watching and directing her proceedings, haste and impatience too evidently struggling with his effort at politeness, was very much against her right understanding, and the quick progress of the work in hand.

It was found at last that it had been, as Claud exclaimed with a gesture of angry impatience, "done all wrong!" and tearing it from her with so little gentleness, that the leather cut her hand, said he supposed he must go without it.

But on Blanche drawing away her hand, and turning very red, he perceived he had hurt her, and was obliged, for very shame, to beg pardon, and to allow her, as she earnestly entreated, (his apology being all too readily taken), to make a second attempt.

He did not stand to watch her this time, but walked about, boiling inwardly, but still not a little ashamed of having given way to his feelings in so unmannerly a fashion.

Blanche this time proved successful both as to speed and to skill; restoring her work to Claud with such an amiable, good-natured apology for her former awkwardness, that the young man could do no less than thank her kindly, and slightly caressing the injured hand, hope he had not hurt her much.

Oh, Claud! would that all the future wounds with which you are to lacerate that too devoted spirit, were but of the same slight nature, and so quickly, so tenderly to be healed. And how did Blanche reply?

Touched and delighted by so unusual a display of gentle concession, on that proud spirit's

part, a gush of feeling quite irrespective of any thing belonging to the present character of their position towards one another, corresponding more to the innocent, childlike feelings of past days filled her heart, and once more giving way to the impulsive dictates of her warm and impetuous nature, she threw her arms round the neck of her old companion, as he stooped his bright proud head towards her. Poor Blanche! it will be, perhaps, the last time that you are guilty of any such sudden *épanchement*. Even now, when Claud having endured—for we cannot say that he did more—and released himself from his betrothed's accolade, has beaten, perhaps, rather too hasty a retreat, she stands hiding with her hands her crimson cheeks, in an agony of shame and repentance for what she has done, feeling not at all sure, from what she had seen of Claud's countenance, whether he had not been disgusted as well as startled by her boldness.

And, indeed, as this singular engagement proceeded, Blanche found little encouragement

given her to transgress in a similar manner the rules of modest propriety.

Nor could her spirit fail in some degree to resent the extent to which the cavalier and inattentive treatment of her so-called lover soon arrived.

It was necessary that he should spare some portion of his time and attention from his own amusements and pursuits, to bestow upon his intended; but he generally contrived to throw as much pain as pleasure into these occasions.

They rode together, and he would then criticise, in no very flattering manner, her seat, her hand, or her equipments. And sometimes, when Blanche's spirit was tried to the utmost, they would quarrel.

But they were not quite like lovers' quarrels; the bitterness, but not the sweet of such were there. The tears, more in anger than in sorrow, which Blanche shed, were never wiped away by the hand of repentant love.—She must dry them herself, or learn to repress them, as her affianced husband turned away

in coldness or in scorn, and thought—he did not quite go so far as to say so as of yore—that they made her only look more ugly.

Then afterwards, perhaps, he felt a little sorry, and his sorrow expressed, however ungraciously, was as powerful to atone as the warmest expression of affectionate contrition would have been in another.

Mr. James Murray, when he came to Glendee to be introduced to the betrothed husband of his ward, and attend to matters of business, as may be supposed, looked with no very favourable feelings upon his unconscious rival, nor did their intercourse and acquaintance tend in any degree to propitiate him. He no longer wondered, indeed, that such Antinous-like beauty should have been sufficient to enthral the fancy of girl-like Blanche; though that the enthrallment should continue so undiminished, after he had seen the young people together, was to him rather a matter of surprise. And though, with conscious pride, he forbore making any comment on the subject to those of Blanche's friends who knew him

as her disappointed suitor, to Claud himself, when conversing professionally on the subject of his ward's marriage, he ventured dryly to remark, that he hoped that it was not entirely as an *affaire de convenance* that the young man had entered into the engagement, but that there was sufficient inclination on his part to make it one likely to ensure the happiness of his young cousin.

Claud, with the most haughty *sang froid*, answered,—“So he hoped also,” but vouchsafed no more satisfactory assurance on the subject.

The dislike entertained by Mr. Murray towards young Loraine was, indeed, quite mutual.

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“Mr. Claud,” continued Mrs. Lea, “was tired of shooting long before the winter was over. Yet, as it was settled that we should remain at Glendee till that season came to a close, he was bound to be chiefly with us throughout the time, absenting himself, however,

pretty frequently on visits to friends and acquaintances in the neighbouring county. He was courted and caressed, as usual, wherever he carried his bright presence. And there were now other and more substantial circumstances to give weight to his attractions; in the eyes of the world, the future husband of a wealthy heiress is in no case to be despised.

Blanche the while remained in quiet seclusion at home, mixing in no society but that of the few guests invited to Glendee.

There had been some talk of her going to London to be presented at court before her marriage; but the project was finally relinquished, it being agreed that we should move to Edinburgh early in the spring, and there the marriage should take place. More than one reason there was, I suppose, to strengthen the desire entertained by the two mothers, that the event should take place with as little delay as possible.

Mrs. Pierrepont did not wish to postpone her departure for India any longer than was absolutely necessary.

She was yearning to be with her son ; whilst, again, Mrs. Spencer, who had been very ill during her first confinement, had written to entreat her mother to be with her on the second occasion.

“ My Blanche,” she would say, as if in apology for her abandonment of this other child, “ will not require me as much as Rose and Harry, in a far distant land, surrounded by strangers ; she will ever have your love and care, dear Lea, and that of Mrs. Loraine, her second mother.”

I had confided to Mrs. Pierrepont the desperate state of my health, which, in any case, would have prevented my accompanying her abroad, but had promised to continue my services to her daughter, as long and as far as I found it possible. Alas ! my subsequent consultation of the clever doctors in Edinburgh, soon determined the very limited scale to which those services would be reduced.

And Blanche—my dear nurseling—her mother was about to leave her—to join her children in that far-off India. Alas ! it is not always

amongst strangers, or in a strange land, that most care and sympathy is needed. It is in "the house of our friends" that the severest wounds are often dealt to us—those the nearest and dearest, who prove the fountain of our bitterest woe.

Mrs. Loraine, for her own private reasons, was particularly urgent against the unnecessary trouble and delay the London plan would necessitate. How remarkable, indeed, the extreme anxiety manifested by her for the marriage to take place in Scotland! And often, I believe, is this the case; the worldly wise and prudent often overshoot their own designs.

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It was, therefore, in February, that we made preparations to move to Edinburgh, whilst Mrs. Loraine and her son repaired to London.

CHAPTER VIII.

BLANCHE experienced as much sorrow at this parting, as another would have done, under the same circumstances, from the most devoted lover ; and all the time they were separated, continued in a restless and miserable state, anxious and fearful, perhaps, lest something might arrive to destroy her hopes—that Claud might never return.

His letters, however, were kind, though brief and less frequent than are usually those of one in his position. The conduct, too, of her intended, for some time previous to his departure, had been calculated more than usual to keep up the infatuated fondness of

her heart, and he had parted with her almost affectionately.

But this improvement, even, had originated in previous neglect, carried to so disgraceful an extent, that not only his mother had seriously to reprimand and represent to him this extreme impropriety of his conduct, and the impossibility of their engagements being continued, unless the aspect of affairs greatly altered; but Blanche herself was earnestly entreated by her mother to break off, on her own part, a marriage which it was but too evident never could contribute to her happiness. But Blanche was inexorable; Claud must be the one to break off their engagement, if he found that he did not love her enough for its fulfilment to contribute to his own happiness; but she would never be the one to take that step, whatever might be his conduct, which she refused, nevertheless, to view in the same desperate light as we did. "If I am doomed to be miserable," she added, "I would far rather suffer with Claud than without him." She did, however, take cou-

rage to speak to him upon the subject ; repeated what her mother had suggested, and what had been her answer ; desiring, however, only to consult his own happiness, she would be ruled entirely by his wishes ; he must decide in the manner most agreeable to his inclinations.

“ Were I of age, dear Claud,” she continued, “ I would make you independent of every circumstance ; but, alas ! for some years I am powerless ; and I find also that this fortune is fettered by restrictions which render me unable to follow the dictates of my heart, otherwise you should be rich, come what might.”

The young man was sobered a little by what he heard ; and touched, perhaps, by this further proof of Blanche’s generosity and faithful devotion, he humbled himself so far, as to confess and bewail his short-comings and offences towards her ; declared himself unworthy of such generous affection ; owned that he did forget, too often, he was afraid, that they were no longer on the same brother and sister terms

that they used to be. Blanche spoilt him—she always had done so—and he, like a graceless fellow as he was, presumed on her good-nature. He hoped to behave better for the future, and left it in Blanche's own hands whether he was to be forgiven, since he would not draw back from the engagement, to whatever motives might be ascribed his persisting to retain it. He believed every one thought him a mercenary brute, and that, perhaps, soured his temper a little, and made him wish that their good old friend's last dying will and testament had not placed him in such a suspicious predicament. Then, again, it was Blanche's delightful task to soothe these delicate and distressful scruples; and all was again right, *as far*, indeed, as *wrong* ever can be *right*.

But I must not forget to say, that I myself did not omit to raise a warning voice, not only in the hopelessly deafened ears of Blanche, but even into those of Mr. Claud. But that was after receiving a letter from my brother, with whom, I am sorry to say, his young

master had quarrelled in Italy, and indeed had behaved to him with so much haughty severity, as obliged my brother, with extreme regret, to relinquish the trust he had undertaken with such honest and faithful purpose. He had now returned to London, and wrote to me, as I have said, a letter, in which he mentioned to me, in strict confidence, the attachment of Mr. Claud to a young opera-singing lady.

A fact communicated in such a manner I was not, of course, at liberty to repeat; but it troubled me greatly, and seemed to account more plainly for the kind of spirit into which Mr. Claud had evidently entered upon this engagement, and to quicken the anxiety I experienced on my poor child's account. Excited by this feeling, I ventured, the first opportunity which presented itself, to speak out to Mr. Claud some portion of my mind. I must say, as far as I was personally concerned, I had found little cause to complain of Mr. Claud. I used, indeed, to possess more influence over this proud, wayward spirit than

most people, when he was a boy, and I believe he was as fond of me almost as my own dear children. And now still, for old acquaintance sake I suppose, there was always much kindness, even warmth in his manner towards me whenever I came in his way, though perhaps, from the fact of having quarrelled with my brother, and his consciousness in other respects—for he was well aware of my old jealous devotion to Blanche—he had, I fancied, kept out of my way as much as possible, or was rather shy of my conversation. But on this occasion, as I came into his room the night before his departure from Scotland, with the assumed intention of arranging some portion of his packing, but in reality all primed for my anxious purpose, he began to question me very kindly about my health, expressing much concern, when I gave him but a poor account of it.

“But mind, Lea, you must have good medical advice; these Edinburgh doctors can do anything. It will be a dreadful thing if you are obliged to desert us. I don’t think we can possibly get on without you.”

I answered, that I had no greater desire than to devote myself to the service of Miss Blanche ; and if it pleased God to preserve my health sufficiently, I should still be able to do so.

“But, Mr. Claud,” I added, desperately, “I hope I shall not offend you by my impertinence, if I say, that I am far from happy in my mind with respect to you and Miss Blanche. I cannot think, from what I see and hear, that you love her sufficiently to make her happy, as your wife ; and, selfishly speaking, I would rather die than live to witness her unhappiness. Oh, Mr. Claud, she is not like many women you may have met with in the world ; she has such a warm and devoted heart,—it will break, I am sure, if she does not receive from you, as her husband, the faithful affection which is her rightful due.”

Mr. Claud’s brows crimsoned as I spoke, and he stood looking down upon me with an expression of astonished anger in his beautiful eyes ; then he turned impatiently away, saying with haughty coldness—

“ Miss Blanche herself, I think, is the proper person to decide all this. Others, I hear, have already tried to dissuade her on this subject. If *she* is not afraid to risk her heart being broken, it is, I think, very useless and unnecessary, to say the least, in others to interfere.”

“ But oh, Mr. Claud !” I added, with tears in my eyes, “ consider a little before you take so irreparable a step ; remember what solemn vows you will take upon yourself at the altar, and the grievous sin of pronouncing with your lips what you feel in your heart is neither in your power or inclination to fulfil.”

“ Very well, Lea,” changing his tone to one of playful banter, “ I will consider the matter ; there is plenty of time, you know, during the next month or two ; but mind, if I write to say that I find it impossible to fulfil my engagements, you must take upon yourself the responsibility and charge of consoling Blanche for my defalcation. For she will require *a little* consolation, poor girl,—do you not think so, Lea ?” he added, with such saucy signifi-

cance, that I felt still more angry, and replied with much severity—

“I would undertake the task gladly, Mr. Claud; yes, far rather witness the misery that such a course of proceeding would occasion her, than the wretchedness which must inevitably be her portion as the wife of one she loves so dearly, but from whom she cannot look for any affection in return. Nay, rather even would I close her eyes in death, put on her funeral dress, as I have already done for her darling sister, than deck her in the mockery of bridal attire, with no better prospect in view.”

And saying this, I turned away, and sadly and silently began to fold away his clothes, and put them into the trunk.

He stood for some minutes before the fire-place, thoughtfully watching my movements; some suspicions, perhaps, were awakened in his mind as to the originating cause of my attack, for he presently said, assuming as much as possible a tone of proud indifference—

"Pray, Lea, have you heard anything of your brother lately?"

I was a little startled at the question, but I merely answered—

"Yes, sir ; I had a letter from him rather more than a week ago from London," and went on with my packing.

"Oh, indeed ! Well, I was very sorry that we were obliged to part—he was a capital fellow. I have a great regard for him, but the truth was, Lea, he grew so confoundedly interfering and officious, that I could not bear it any longer. One does not like to be treated quite like a boy, or to be lectured and dictated to by a servant. I, at least," he added again, looking frowningly towards me, and speaking with some haughty significance, "will never endure anything of the sort from a person in my service."

I thought it as well to make no remark upon this subject ; and though he was evidently desirous to discover to what extent my brother had communicated with me concerning his Italian proceedings, he was too proud

to make any direct inquiries. Seeing, at length, that I was preparing to depart, and having once more recovered his equanimity, he approached me, holding out his hand, and said, good-naturedly,—

“Well, good night, Lea, let us shake hands. After your lecture on broken hearts, funeral palls, and bridal garments, I shall, indeed, be a hardened sinner, if I don’t turn out a husband to your heart’s content. There, give your Blanche a kiss for me, as I shall not see her again to present it in person. Stop, by-the-bye, I promised that a lock of this,” touching his wavy hair, “for a certain brooch or locket to be ordered in London, should be conveyed to her, so you had better officiate—not for the first time in your life that you have done so, I believe. Come, be careful,” he added, laughing, as that proud, bright head, with whose every shining curl I had once been so familiar, was submitted to my hands. “If all the lockets and brooches for the time to come are to be filled in the same manner, a clear head, indeed, will

soon be made of it. There, there, old woman, that will do capitally—now another for yourself,—that is to say, if you care to have anything belonging to such a scapegrace. Now, put them up together, and your piece, entwined, of course, with a lock of Blanche's, shall be enshrined in a brooch, or something of the sort, the most appropriate and emblematic that I can find,—but not a broken heart, or funeral urn, I promise you.”

And thus he rattled on ; and ere I left the room, my foolish heart was almost worshipping that bright and beautiful being ; even my fear for poor Blanche well nigh forgotten. But it was even so—with every one it was the same. A few flattering words and brilliant smiles, and the most prejudiced or cautious heart was at his bidding ;—yes, even at the very worst, when my tolerance has been tried to the uttermost, I have scarcely sometimes known whether to love or hate him most ; for he was, indeed, one of those beings with whom there was no medium, who to love is almost to worship, and with whom to be

wroth, oh ! it was, indeed, the wroth of which the poet speaks—

“ Which works like madness in the brain ! ”

But one should have known him, or, at least, have seen him, for this rhapsody, on my part, not to seem exaggerated and strained. None but those, indeed, who have had personal experience, who have proved his power to fascinate and enthrall—how his very faults dazzled the judgment, and won too ready an entrance into the soul of those who knew him intimately, or had even looked upon his strange and striking beauty, can enter into its truth. Alas ! Miss Fenton, I cannot now shew you even his likeness ; I, therefore, do not expect you can understand all this.

How might I have surprised Mrs. Lea ; but I reserved the communication for a later period, unwilling to interrupt the present course of her narration, by telling her that her regrets on that score were unnecessary ; that it had been my strange chance to look upon that

portrait of the being whose beauty she had eulogized, and which, to have so beheld, exculpated her at once from the smallest particle of exaggeration. Oh! who could ever look upon that likeness again? If that which now lay defaced among the slimy weeds at the bottom of the deep, dark pool, indeed spoke true, I, too, could fully vouch that he was passing beautiful!—

“Ay, beautiful as a star in the sky,
When the clouds are gloom, and the storm is high,
But still in defiance keep shining on,
Till the shades are past, and the wind is done.
His hair was gold as the pheasant's wing,
And curl'd like the hyacinth flower in spring,
And his eye was that blue, so clear, so dark,
Like the falcon's when flying his highest mark.”

And well—too well—I felt by the sigh I had involuntary heaved—the feeling of sorrowful delight which thrilled my frame, even as I at first admiringly gazed—how fearful in its intensity must be the love which would entwine itself round such a being!

“And thus,” continued Mrs. Lea, by way of conclusion to that evening’s relation, “this young man managed to leave us all with flying colours ; yet the anxious impression that nothing good could ever come of such an union as the one intended, was not long in returning to sit heavily on my heart.”

CHAPTER IX.

AND in April, Mr. Loraine and his mother came back to Edinburgh, and the last day of that month was fixed upon for the wedding. The future bridegroom was not at all anxious to postpone any longer the event,—nay, rather, might have seemed impatient that “it should be over,”—for to no other motive can I ascribe the careless hurry he evinced upon the occasion,—a manifestation which pleased me even less than cold reluctance would have done.

Perhaps he found it still more difficult, after his late absence, to keep up the farce of lover-like attention required of him—a part which before he had so badly sustained ; or did some

knowledge or presentiment, that circumstances might arise to make this necessary, but detestable step, even more difficult, more impossible to accomplish, perhaps entirely prevent it, produce this *empressement*? Mrs. Loraine, I am pretty certain, had taken measures to ascertain the fact to which I allude. Had this knowledge or prevision, I wonder, anything to do with the determined persuasion on Claud's part, to go to London a fortnight after his marriage, instead of to the Willows, the plan suggested by the friends of the young couple, his mother having good reasons, no doubt, for her anxiety on this point.

But no, he showed at once that he was determined to follow his own inclinations for the future in every arrangement and plan. They might sentimentalize as much as Blanche pleased for the first fortnight by every purling stream they came to on their way; but after that they must go to London, to Mivart's. He had a thousand things to do; they would have quite enough of old Willows for the time to come.

pleaded my excuse, and I remained at home with trembling hands and a sinking heart to superintend the packing.

The bride was given away with grim solemnity by the elder Mr. Murray, the son being also present. There were but few guests besides. Miss Shaw kindly officiated as bridesmaid, and her brother as best man.

Mrs. Pierrepont, I was told, was painfully agitated, Mrs. Loraine nearly as much affected. The bridegroom looked supremely handsome—his cheeks were flushed and his brow somewhat clouded; and when he first approached the altar he erected his head, and fixed his eye in cold abstraction as they read the opening portion of the service—otherwise he demeaned himself very properly, and stood calm and quiet whilst he spoke the fitting vows. Blanche, on her part, trembled like an aspen leaf—but happily did not weep.

Claud had told her once, partly in joke, that if she did he would stop the ceremony; and this recollection perhaps restrained her.

They return to the house—the steps are let

down—Claud springs from the carriage, hands out his bride in silence—shakes hands with me hurriedly as I meet them in the hall, commits Blanche to my charge, rushes up-stairs, and shuts himself in his own room.

Blanche clung to me, as I folded her in my arms, with the convulsive fervour which was peculiar to her from a child under the influence of any extraordinary feeling, her heart palpitating violently against my breast. But still she shed no tears. The other carriages quickly followed.

There was a breakfast, to which Mr. Loraine Fordyce (I forgot to tell you that that name, by the will of the late Mr. Fordyce, the young couple were obliged to assume) came down, and eat and drank, and laughed and talked, they say, in an excited manner, Blanche remaining up stairs with her mother.

The carriage with its four posters drove to the door. Claud ran up-stairs and was shut in for a few moments with Mrs. Pierrepont, whilst we took Blanche away to put on her bonnet, I being already equipped.

When she returned he made his escape, for the parting to take place between mother and her child. I too went down to take my seat. Mr. Claud came forward from the steps where he stood, to ask me if I was comfortable. He looked very pale, almost, I thought, as if he had been weeping, and stood looking subdued and tolerably patient, awaiting Blanche's somewhat tardy appearance.

Mrs. Loraine at length brought her to the door, her veil was down, as they hurried her into the carriage; I could not see her face. Mr. Loraine jumped in after her.

I have a confused remembrance of three faint cheers being raised by the party below, of a half-suppressed laugh proceeding from a window above, where the maid servants were assembled, as an old shoe, which for good luck was hurled down upon us, struck me on the shoulder just as the horses were starting forward, then the sound of the church bells ringing in my ears, as we rattled through the streets of the city.

But everything besides, seems to me as a confused, bewildering dream.

* * * * *

The fortnight was scarcely over, when we found ourselves in London.

We were none of us, perhaps, very sorry at the honeymoon trip being thus prematurely brought to an end. As for myself, the fatigue of constant change—for Mr. Loraine never spent a day at any place, whatever might be its interests or attractions, without becoming weary and restless, and anxious to move on to another—was very trying. Nor could Blanche, I fancy, have found much enjoyment or satisfaction in a course of proceeding which seemed to give her companion so little gratification.

Yes, we arrived in London, and drew up to Mivart's Hotel, that resort of the fashionable and wealthy—a class to which my poor Blanche now belonged; and through her—her husband.

The most commodious set of apartments had been prepared for the newly-married pair, and they were now welcomed with that eager and

obsequious attention which the distinguished in rank or riches rarely fail to find every where awaiting them. But still—*poor* Blanche indeed!—Happier—richer far! had the lowliest cot—the meanest hostelry—now opened its humble door to give her entrance, leaning on the arm of a proud and loving husband. Yet little did I imagine how quickly she was to taste all the bitterness of her position.

CHAPTER X.

It was between seven and eight when we alighted. Blanche went straight up-stairs, and Mr. Claud only paused at the bottom of the steps to desire that dinner might be served immediately.

I was standing at the door superintending the unloading of the carriage, when a servant, who had preceded us to make all ready, came forward with some letters, which he presented to his master.

"Letters," Mr. Claud said, carelessly taking them from his hand.

"Yes, sir. I called at the club as you desired, and these were given to me."

And truly it was an alarming heap which had been accumulated; from the glimpse I caught of their general appearance, it was easy to guess their contents—bills they seemed, of every shape and size. He did not stop to examine them, but proceeded at once to his dressing-room.

Blanche's toilette was performed as quickly as possible, and she had gone into the drawing-room about ten minutes, when, to my surprise, I heard Mr. Loraine from his dressing-room, his bell having just before violently rung, call out in a hoarse and agitated voice to the servant when he knocked at the door in answer to his summons, and desire that a cab might be ordered round to the door immediately.

We had before been rather struck by the bustle, betokening a more than usual degree of impatience on his part, which had been going on in his apartment. Indeed, Blanche had smilingly remarked, that Claud was making a great noise, and seemed very impatient for his dinner.

I was surprised at what I now heard, and

when he opened his door to come out into the passage, standing before me in full evening attire, the very diamond studs—Blanche's wedding gift—glittering on his shirt breast, I could not refrain from exclaiming, in a tone betokening my astonishment—

“Are you going out, sir?”

“Yes,” he answered hurriedly—“yes, Lea, I find I am obliged to go out; I have had a letter communicating something of the most urgent importance. Tell Blanche, will you, to have her dinner? I will be back as soon as possible.”

“Mrs. Fordyce is in the sitting-room, sir,” I gravely suggested, but he heard or heeded me not, and straight down stairs he rushed, and out of the house the next moment; I then heard the cab whirl fast away.

I went into the sitting-room, and told my young lady simply what I had been desired to inform her—that Mr. Loraine Fordyce had received a letter of importance, which obliged him to go out.

“What! and has he gone?” cried Blanche, in startled dismay.

“Yes, he has just driven away.”

Without seeing her, telling her not a word about it, leaving her to dine alone. What business could it be?

Did he not give me one word of explanation?

Nothing, I answered, but what I had told her.

“Very strange! What can it be?” and Blanche clasped her hands, the dark shadow of some anxious fear darkening her countenance, and she walked about the room in an agitated, excited manner.

I tried to soothe her by the hope he had given of his speedy return, and did all I could to persuade her to eat some of the dinner they brought up, but she would scarcely touch a morsel. It grew worse, when hour after hour rolled away, and no husband returned. Every carriage which passed or stopped at the door, alternately raised and disappointed her anxious hopes.

Poor Blanche! it was the first trial of thy

woman's wedded heart in this school of misery—thy first long watching—

“For the steps which came not back!”

The poor young wife would not go to bed, but suffered me to undress her, only out of consideration to me, I found; for she then begged me to leave her, and seek that rest I, indeed, so greatly needed. But though it was nearly one o'clock, I could not bring myself to do so. I could not leave my child in those strange large rooms alone, in her forsaken misery; for miserable she was, though her disquietude took so uncertain a shape—was but dark, vague, and unsubstantial, as appeared in the tone with which, once winding her arms round my neck, she exclaimed—

“Oh, Lea! where do you think he can be gone?”

Then she questioned me more minutely—

“When did he receive the letter? Was he in evening attire? Even what he had on; if it was for an evening party he seemed

dressed? Oh! he could not have left her so soon—so very soon—on the first evening of their arrival, merely to go to a party! Could no one tell where he had ordered the cab to drive?”

Alas! I had already taken care to make inquiries to that effect, but Mr. Claud had left the house, it seems, with such impetuous speed, that no one was in time to hear the order given by himself to the driver; he had even left without a servant. Another and another hour passed away—the dawn was faintly breaking. I did all I could to persuade my young lady to go to bed, and promised to lie down on the sofa; but her agony of apprehension had arrived at too great a pitch for such a proceeding.

At length the street-door rang. His step was heard slowly ascending the stairs.

Blanche started up, and rushed to the dressing-room door, flinging it wide open, and passing through just as he entered by the other.

“Oh, Claud!” she cried, “where, where

have you been? And to start so suddenly—to remain so long away! I have been so wretched, so afraid; and you look so ill, so very ill,—what, what has happened?”

“Go away, Blanche, you will drive me mad,” was the reply I heard spoken, in accents of extreme anger and impatience. “Leave me, I desire you to leave me; go to bed; why are you not in bed?”

“Go to bed? Could I go to bed not knowing where you had gone—why you left me so abruptly?” Blanche pleaded, piteously.

“Where I had gone! Am I not at liberty to go where and when I please?” the husband exclaimed, still more fiercely.

“Oh, yes, Claud—but this first night, so soon after our arrival, not a word to tell me that you were going; and something has happened, I am sure, to distress you, you look so pale, so wild, and your eyes so bloodshot,—tell me, only tell me what has happened? I am your wife, I have a right to know; you should tell me everything.”

“Should I?” with a hard and bitter laugh.
“I think, perhaps, it would be better not!”

And then I thought it expedient to interfere, for I saw Blanche was excited beyond all prudence by her late agitation and long watching, so I came forward into the dressing-room, saying—

“My dear Mrs. Fordyce, it is better, indeed, that you should go to bed. I cannot allow this any longer—you will make yourself quite ill.”

Blanche had been evidently kneeling before the seat on which Mr. Claud had thrown himself on his first entrance; and, though now he had pushed back his chair, and rising with frantic impatience, had retreated to the farther extremity of the room, there she still knelt; her long dark hair had escaped from its fastening, falling over her shoulders, whilst her eyes were raised imploringly towards her husband, whom I could just see, by the dim light, looked dreadfully ill and haggard.

He appeared, however, in some degree, ashamed and sobered by my unexpected ap-

pearance. He turned away his head, and, in a tone of almost humble entreaty, desired me to take Blanche away, saying, that he was in no mood that night to be questioned or tormented,—that she ought to have been in bed.

She ought, indeed! It was nearly day; but I obeyed him without a word, Blanche resisting no longer.

The moment that we had crossed the threshold, the door was violently shut and bolted upon us. Blanche, in silent misery, laid down upon her bed, and I, most thoroughly worn out, crept away, trembling in every limb, to my own chamber.

To-morrow I will relate to you, as well as I am able, the particulars which brought about the events of this unhappy night. The recollection of it always causes me such bitter pain, that this evening I feel unable to proceed.

CHAPTER XI.

It appears that amongst the letters which the servant put into his young master's hand, he had very soon discovered one of a much more interesting character than the others, which consisted mostly of bills and dunning applications.

It was written in a youthful female hand, and ran as follows :—

“ Dear Mr. Loraine,

“ I am doing a very wrong thing, I fear, in writing to you, as I am obliged, without mamma's permission or knowledge ; but I cannot bear to think that you should hear of

our arrival in London only through the announcement of the public papers.

“Oh, dear Mr. Loraine, my joy is great at the thought that I shall see you so soon again ; for if you are in London at the time, which I suppose you are certain to be, you will not, I am sure, forget your promise of being present at my *debüt* at the Opera House ; and though before that night mamma would not allow even you, I am afraid, to be admitted, at least next Saturday we shall surely meet.

“My engagement with the London manager was so recent and unexpected, mamma having previously given up, much to my distress, every idea of my appearing in England this season, that you may not have seen till quite lately the announcement of the appearance of the ‘Signora Anna Stella,’ by which names I am henceforth to be known in a professional character. You scarcely are aware, I believe, that Anna is my first Christian name, but to you, Claud, let me be now and ever as before, ‘Stella.’ I have not time to tell you how long the period has appeared since we parted,—a

long interval, indeed, to have existed without hearing of or from you, since the one dear letter you wrote to us from Calais, on your way to England; but now that the pain of hope deferred is over, I would not that it had been different. It will but increase the joy of our re-union; it will but have proved more surely the strength and constancy of our love.

“ Yes, joy to me and to you, Claud; for I will not for one moment, even, entertain the thought that your heart can have changed in one degree towards

“ Your ever affectionate

“ STELLA.”

Alas! alas! having read this letter, for I have already shown you what had been its effect upon the unhappy young man. Stung, doubtless, by the pangs of self-reproach, repentance, and despair, to a reckless disregard of all that should have restrained him, he had followed the passionate impulse of his feelings, and attired himself, as we have seen, for the Opera,

rushing promptly to attend the call he had now no right to obey,—to which it had been far more merciful to have shut his ears for ever, rather than for his own selfish gratification thus fly to gaze upon a face he ought never to have looked upon again.

But nevertheless he went.

The house was densely crowded ; a friend, however, happening to enter at the same time, though rather surprised, doubtless, at seeing one so newly married thus alone in public, offered to accommodate him, and he accompanied him into his box.

* * * * *

The opera had begun ; the new prima donna had already made her appearance, and the audience were in a flutter of delighted impatience for her return.

She was a young and most interestingly beautiful creature, and her exquisite singing had created much sensation. “ But,” said my brother, who was in the house that very evening purposely to hear her sing, and who told me all this, “ I, who in Italy had seen her

so frequently, missed much of the bright animation which had formerly distinguished her acting, and made her singing the more attractive. I could see her eye wandering wistfully round the theatre between the pauses of her songs, as if in quest of some one amongst the audience whom she could not find (I was sitting in the front row of the pit, and had a very good view of her countenance). I pitied the poor beautiful young creature from the bottom of my heart, for alas!" my brother added, "I guessed too well the object of her search; and look, indeed, I thought she might in vain.

"But there was a striking change soon after her next appearance, when having, for one moment, stood silently on the stage, I saw her eyes light up as suddenly as if the sun had unexpectedly shone down upon them, and such a smile illumined her whole countenance, and played upon her ruddy lips, as they parted with a burst of ringing melody.

"I never saw or heard anything so beautiful.

"I forget which opera," my brother Gilbert

said, "it was in which she was singing, but she was dressed in long white glistening robes, and wore a single star of brilliants on the coronet of hair encircling her head, and which I had often seen her wear before, when in Italy, at Lord Duncan's, and other private occasions, but never before when at the Opera. It was the gift, I knew full well, of my late master, for I saw him take it out of the case and examine it when it first came home from the jewellers. But judge of my startled surprise, when instinctively turning my eyes from the stage in the direction Miss Fitz-Henry's seemed to have taken, I perceived Mr. Loraine, whom I had imagined still far off upon his wedding tour, bending forward from one of the upper boxes, his handsome face glowing with excitement, and his eyes strained anxiously towards the stage.

"How his whole aspect reminded me at that moment of some picture of a beautiful fallen angel I had seen in Italy; and I knew that he had been married only a fortnight, and I saw no lady with him. My heart misgave me that there was mischief in the wind.

“What business had he to be there, and thus amusing himself at such a time, under such circumstances ?

“I scarcely took my eyes off his face throughout the remainder of the opera. Whilst Miss Fitz-Henry was on the stage, he continued nearly in the same position as I have described. When she left it, he leant his face within his folded arms upon the edge of the box, till again her voice startled him into attention.

“The curtain fell ; they were cheering the successful *debütante* vociferously, and she had to appear before the audience to receive the customary homage of bouquets, and no doubt even costlier offerings, showered upon her.

“But still I kept my eye fixed upon Mr. Claud. He stood up, too, with the rest, but he did not bend forward ; the red glow had passed from his countenance, and he struck me as looking deadly pale. Then, when the curtain again had fallen, he turned as if about to leave the box, and it was with evident impatience that he found himself detained by the conversation of the other gentleman, his com-

panion, for I saw his eye turn, ever and anon, to the door with an anxious, eager expression.

“At length, just as he was making his escape, such a succession of hysterical shrieks were heard from behind the scenes, that the whole house rose with startled wonder and affright. A great many people rushed out from their places, and when I looked again towards the box which had contained Mr. Claud, he, too, had disappeared.

“The alarming sounds had ceased, or, at least, the closing of a door may have deadened them to our ears.

“I took up my hat, and leaving the pit, hastened to make inquiries of a person belonging to the establishment, with whom I was slightly acquainted, concerning the cause of this disturbance.

“The Signora Anna Stella had been taken very ill—an hysterical fit, or something of the kind. ‘Were any of the audience allowed behind the scenes?’ I asked.

“Express commands had been given this

night to the contrary, by the particular desire of the mother of the *débutante*, who seemed a regular dragon ; but it had been impossible to prevent some few from forcing their way. One young man had nearly knocked down the person who attempted to impede his progress ; he supposed (the man added, with a knowing look) that he was a particular friend of the Signora's. However, he offered to get me in, and I thought it best to accept his offer. There was a great deal of running to and fro, opening and shutting of doors, and confusion of tongues, English and Italian, in the territory I had penetrated. The opera singers were crowding together as I passed the green-room door, discussing the catastrophe ; opera dancers, their toilettes only half completed, occasionally issuing from their holes and corners, appearing on the scene. One or two gentlemen who had succeeded in effecting an entrance, also mingled amongst the throng. I asked some one where was the Signora Stella ?

“ Oh, in the dressing-room yonder ; you won't get in there,” my conductor added with

a grin ; ' there's only one besides the doctor, who has been so fortunate ; no doubt he'll do her the most good of the two.'

" Then, very soon after, a cry was heard for the Signora's carriage to draw up. I had made my way to the door ; I was told the prima donna was to pass through, and almost at the same moment that this call was given, Mr. Claud rushed past me.

" I hardly saw where he went, it was so sudden, and the carriage at the same time obstructed my view.

" There was five minutes' delay, and then a figure appeared wrapped up in a cloak, her hair hanging loose and disordered around her, no trace, save the bright star still glittering amongst her tresses, left of the fairy-like creature who had so lately charmed us.

" She was supported by her mother and a maid-servant, and followed by the medical gentleman who had been in attendance.

" The ladies entered the carriage, and were driven away, the doctor following in a cab. One of the gentlemen who had penetrated

behind the scenes also came up ; I recognized him as Mr. Leveson. ‘Sir,’ I said, touching my hat respectfully, ‘I fear there is something very wrong with Mr. Loraine—do you know where he is gone?’

“‘Not I, Lea,’ the young man replied, with no little concern in his look, ‘but most likely to Green Street, where these people live. It is really scandalous of him—he must be quite mad—how very distressing for his unfortunate bride—really, Lea, you should look better after your young master.’

“‘Alas, sir, I am no longer in his service ; I quitted it soon after you left Italy ; but some one, I think, should counsel him ; he would not, of course, brook my interference—but you, sir—I think it would be kind to follow him—he is so rash—so intemperate—one never can answer for his actions.’

“‘Oh, my good fellow,’ the young gentleman replied, ‘after all, it is no business of mine either, and I do not much like interfering in a delicate matter like this ; but really there would be no harm in your keeping an

eye upon him, and seeing him safe back to Mivart's, where, I believe, they are staying—that is to say, if he has not left his unfortunate wife behind in the country—which, perhaps, would have been the kindest thing he could have done, if this is the way he intends to go on. Come, I will just walk with you in that direction ;' and we proceeded towards Green Street, Grosvenor Square ; he making enquiries on the way as to our proceedings after he had parted from us at Milan.

“Mr. Leveson was always a very superior young man ; he was a few years older than Mr. Claud, and very different in his tastes and habits ; but still, as it often happens—though so totally unlike in disposition—there existed a strong friendship between the two. Mr. Leveson was much interested in his impetuous, unruly young friend, and Mr. Claud looked up and admired the other, acknowledging his superiority.

“I told Mr. Leveson that I was waiting to accompany an old invalid gentleman to the

Continent, when the doctors considered him well enough to travel. He laughed, and said he hoped I should find the old sick gentleman less troublesome than the healthy young one ; and thus we reached Green Street.

* * * * *

“ The carriage had driven from the door, but the cab still waited before it ; and there Mr. Claud was truly to be seen pacing to and fro, like one distracted.

“ Mr. Leveson nodded to me significantly, and walked away, but I remained still standing there, a little out of sight, imagining that he would wait till the doctor came out.

“ He did not make his appearance for more than half an hour, and Mr. Claud then began evidently to question him with the most eager vehemence. After that, I was in hopes he would go away ;—but no, when the doctor left him he stood still for a few minutes, then striking his clenched hand upon his brow with a gesture of passionate despair, began again to pace up and down upon the pavement.

"I could no longer keep quiet, but walked forward past him as if unconscious of his identity, and then turned back and accosted him in a tone of affected surprise—

" 'Sir—I beg your pardon—I was not aware that it was you—I hope you are well.'

"He thought at first, I believe, that I was a policeman, and turned very sharply round; but on seeing who it was, though he started a little, appeared not as angry or disturbed as might have been expected at the recognition.

" 'Lea! you here?' he exclaimed.

" 'Yes sir; I trust you are not ill—you look so;' the light of the gas lamp plainly revealed his haggard countenance; 'will you allow me to call a cab?'

" 'No—yes—thank you,' he stammered forth; but just at that moment a cab did drive past, and, on the chance of its being empty, I hailed the driver.

"The man half drew up, but two heads were thrust out of the window, showing that it was already occupied.

"The occupants proved, however, to be ac-

quaintances of Mr. Claud's; they recognized him, and he was invited to enter.

"Whether willing or not, he did not refuse, but on the steps being let down sprang in amongst them, and I was left standing alone.

"It seems, however," my brother regretfully concluded, "that it was not for many hours after, that Mr. Loraine returned to Mivart's; no doubt, he was persuaded into joining his friends in play, a pursuit, to which I must say, that it was only under the influence of any unusual excitement he was greatly addicted."

CHAPTER XII.

“MAMMA! mamma!” had been the joyous cry with which, her countenance radiant as the star above her brow, Stella greeted her mother as she flew breathlessly towards her, on her exit from the stage, after she had beheld her lover amongst the audience. “Mamma! mamma! he is here!”

“Who is here? Pray, Stella, do not excite yourself in this manner. There, let me arrange your veil; now drink the water Signor Gallini is kindly holding for you all this time, and keep yourself quiet. You know I never allow a word to be spoken between the parts. Your whole attention should be given to the

piece, even when you are not immediately engaged in it. Are you not of my opinion, Signor?"

"The Signorina surpassed herself in the last scene," was the politely evasive answer.

Stella obediently restrained the overflowing gladness of her heart, giving it vent only in the radiant smile with which she rewarded the Signor for his compliment, at the same time as she accepted the glass of water from his hands, and then stood waiting with but too evident impatience, to spring forward once more upon the scene, very heedless and unconscious of the admiring gaze with which the dark eyes of her Italian adorer were fixed upon her.

For such, almost as a matter of course, was the handsome tenor with whom she had sung a great deal in Italy, but whose advances in this character, as far, indeed, as it was possible to make them, under the jealous surveillance of the lady mother, with whom, nevertheless, he was on terms of considerable intimacy—

Stella, by the little regard she paid to them, seemed pretty much to confuse with the acting and rehearsal of those impassioned parts in which they were so often together engaged.

But her turn soon came to reappear, sooner, by a few moments, than that of the Signor's, who continued by Mrs. Fitz-Henry's side. "I think my daughter said that our friend Mr. Loraine was in the house," the latter carelessly remarked to the Italian.

"Si, Signora," with a soft complacent smile, he answered: "*Il nuovo marito.*"

"*Che—chi?* Who? What did you say?" Mrs. Fitz-Henry exclaimed, startled out of her usual dignified composure.

"Ah! you have not heard," with some malicious eagerness, "that the Signor Loraine is lately married?"

"To whom?" was the perfectly cool reply, without the movement of a muscle in the inquirer's face.

"Ah! I know not her name; but it is a rich young lady, they say an heiress. And our

friend the young and handsome Signor Lorraine," the Italian added, with peculiar emphasis, in his own expressive language, "was poor, I believe?"

"What is your authority?" Mrs. Fitz-Henry next demanded.

"My authority—my authority? oh! every one knows it, talks of it, who knew him in Italy. I saw it in a paper just after I came into England. *Scusate, Signora!*" and he left abruptly to go upon the stage.

Mrs. Fitz-Henry received her daughter in silence, when she next returned to her side. But Stella attempted not, after her late reproof, again to transgress her stated rule, though each time she appeared, her happy elation of spirits seemed greater than before.

* * * * *

But it is over at last—her part is played; she is crowned with success—and now she comes for her reward! Once more burst forth, without restraint, the joyous cry—

“Mamma—mamma! he is here, after all! I have seen him. Claud—Claud Loraine, I mean. Oh! will you not send and tell him to come here! Or stay, mamma—you cannot refuse me—let me this once stop during the ballet. Signor Gallini,” perceiving the Italian, “will, I am sure, procure us places in some box.”

“Hush, Stella!” Mrs. Fitz-Henry replied, in a low stern voice, though her countenance was expressive of strong anxiety and concern; “Hush!” and she took her daughter’s arm, and led her forcibly away. “You don’t know what has happened, since Claud Loraine parted from us in Italy. You must no longer think of him as before. You must cast him from your thoughts for ever.”

“Mamma—mamma! what do you mean?” tearing away her arm from her mother’s grasp, and looking in her face with a wild, terror-stricken gaze. “Oh! speak, what do you mean? I have seen him; he is here, I have seen him, I say. He loves me, I am

sure he loves me still," she cried hysterically.

"He cannot—he does not, Stella. He has deceived you, my child! Call up all your virtuous pride and self-possession;" for Stella became pale and rigid as a statue at these words. "He has but proved himself the light—the inconstant being I ever deemed him; unworthy, most unworthy of my precious child. *He is married!*"

And then came the startling sounds which had reached the ears of the audience; for the last words that Mrs. Fitz-Henry had spoken seemed to have shot through her listener's slender frame like an electric shock. And she started forward with that word issuing from her lips, followed by a succession of hysterical shrieks, which echoed shrilly through the house, then threw herself passionately upon the ground.

Several people, Signor Gallini amongst the number, came rushing to the spot; but Mrs. Fitz-Henry having, with the assistance of their female attendant, who came out of the dress-

ing-room at the sound, succeeded in raising the poor girl from the ground, hurriedly explained the attack as a hysterical seizure, brought on by over-fatigue and excitement, then dragged her into the dressing-room, requesting that no one but their maid should follow.

They laid poor Stella on a couch, put back her hair from her brow, and bathed it with essences; but she had not fainted, though her eyes were closed. And, turning from them with a gesture of despairing misery, she covered up her face, moaning piteously.

There was a knock at the door. Mrs. Fitz-Henry went herself to ascertain who it was. A doctor was in attendance, if his services were required. Mrs. Fitz-Henry opened the door at once to admit him. At the same moment another person rushed past them into the room; it was Claud Loraine.

With an exulting cry, Stella started to her feet, and with extended arms waited to receive him.

“It is not true,” she screamed; “he is come—he is here! he is not married. Oh! Claud, you are not married? You love me still,” she replied, leaning her hand against his shoulder, as in his desperate madness he darted forward and received her in his arms.

And he answered in a voice hoarse and tremulous with agitation—

“Yes, Stella, yes, so help me heaven! I love you still—yes, still, and you alone—for ever!”

But Mrs. Fitz-Henry, with a strong and sudden grasp, snatched her daughter from his embrace, and placed herself between them.

“Begone, sir!” she sternly said, “begone this moment; or, stay, first let my daughter hear your answer to her other question. Is what I have heard to-night true or false? Are you married?”

Claud’s lips moved as if there were about to come forth a storm of angry passionate defiance; but his eyes turned upon Stella.

He caught the wistful agony of her countenance, as, still trembling in her mother's determined grasp, she leant forward gaspingly to hear his hoped-for denial. A pang of unutterable anguish and remorse struck upon his soul. He sank upon a settee near, and covering his face with his hands, groaned forth,—

“Oh! Stella! my Stella, forgive me! I am the veriest wretch alive.”

And Stella again sunk like a crushed worm upon the ground, moaning forth most piteously—

“Oh! Claud—oh! Claud, you have killed me. Was this your love, so soon, so very soon to forget? Oh! mamma, mamma! take me away to die!”

And she held out her arms to her mother, who, with the assistance of the doctor, an astonished spectator of this extraordinary scene, again raised her on the couch, and then turning to Claud with a peremptory wave of her hands, commanded his instant departure.

“You have done enough, sir—leave us.

Your presence here is but insult added to injury."

"Madam!" Claud cried, springing madly to his feet, "I call heaven to witness that this is your work. It is you—not I, who have been the cause of all this misery. It is your pride—your wretched, ambitious vanity that has brought us to this pass. Did you not deny her to me when I could have made her mine? Was it not your fault that I ever left her? And now—see to what your maternal regard for the welfare of your child has reduced her. And, if worse comes of it, if even sin and misery be the consequence, on your head be the guilt—the misery. If she dies, it is not I, but you who will have killed her. Stella! Stella! do not curse me," he added, kneeling by the couch, and snatching the cold hand which hung helplessly by her side. "Pity me, pity me, Stella! for gnawing regret—never-dying remorse is, indeed, added to my misery, and life henceforth will be to me but a living death."

"Go—go, Claud!" Stella murmured, faintly.

"Go! this agony is too much for me to bear. It kills me—I forgive you. Go!"

And the cold hand struggled to disengage itself.

"Leave us, pray, sir!" interrupted the doctor. "The young lady, indeed, is not in a state to be thus agitated. I should advise you, madam," turning to Mrs. Fitz-Henry, "to order your carriage, and take your daughter home at once, for quiet and privacy are more suitable to her condition. If you will allow me, I will go and see for it immediately. And you, sir," he added, politely to Claud, whom he judged to be a person of rank and distinction, "will, I am sure, kindly accompany me?"

"He will certainly do so," exclaimed Mrs. Fitz-Henry in a voice of thunder, planting herself between the young man and her daughter, "or others shall be called, who may have more power to enforce the respect he denied us. I have friends of influence and consideration within the house. Yes! call the carriage, sir."

The doctor opened the door, and Claud, darting one more glance of mingled grief and indignation from the mother towards her prostrate child, rushed precipitately, as already related, from the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

I do not know, resumed Mrs. Lea, when again she returned to her story, which of us three looked the worse when we again met, the morning after our wretched night of watching and excitement. My poor child, whilst I dressed her, made no allusion whatever to what had happened; but her heavy eyes and spiritless countenance testified too well to the sense and memory of her late sufferings.

She would not have breakfast till her husband, long after noon, made his appearance; and then her demeanour towards him—I was present at their first meeting—I thought was

just as it ought to have been,—amiable, gentle, but dignified and gravely, silently sorrowful.

Mr. Claud, on the contrary, looked like one who is suffering under the reaction of some strong excitement; subdued, dejected, and somewhat humbled and ashamed.

He did not look his young wife in the face; and spoke to her, when he did speak, in a tone which for him was penitent and conciliatory.

I heard Blanche ask him if he would go with her to the miniature painter's, whom she wished to take his picture; an arrangement to which he consented at once, murmuring at the same time that she had better have her's taken also. The carriage was ordered; they went out together. They had a great deal to do, and did not return till quite late to dinner. Both, I then thought, particularly Blanche, looked happier than before they set out. But I, in the meantime, had had a visit from my brother; judge, therefore, if my heart was more at rest. Yet, at the same time, might not the catastrophe of last night have

brought this grievous state of things to a crisis?—given a final shock to feelings, which, however intense and tenaciously cherished, had not proved of sufficient strength and constancy to stand the trial and temptation to which, in the absence of its object, it had been exposed? Might it not be hoped that in this last impotent ebullition, it had received its death-blow, and that duty and principle might now assert their power over that fiery, wayward, but, I hoped, not entirely corrupted will;—had not, indeed, last night's vehement excitement been already exceeded by a listless unconcern? I don't believe that he even took any direct measures to ascertain the further condition of the unfortunate girl, whose sufferings he had caused.

* * * *

The papers, a few days after, mentioned the great disappointment occasioned in the musical world by the illness of the talented cantatrice, who, on the last Saturday, had made so brilliant a *débüt* upon the boards of the Italian

Opera House ; making it impossible for her to fulfil her engagement on the following opera night.

Blanche, looking over the paper, had remarked upon this paragraph.

"What a pity," she said ; "I was just going to propose, Claud, that we should go to the opera, and hear this new singer, they gave such an interesting account of her performance last Saturday. She seems to be so young and lovely, and to sing so beautifully. I wonder what her illness could have been,—so strange and sudden ? She left the stage quite well. Her screams were heard all over the house, and there was a great commotion."

Mr. Loraine's face was concealed behind the other sheet of the paper, with which too, he was engaged. He rustled it impatiently, and took no further notice of the remark.

It was some moments after this, that he started up, and proposed to Blanche that they should set off to the Willows immediately.

"To the Willows now ?"

"Yes. Was not that what she had wished to do a fortnight ago ?"

"Yes, *then*! But now that they were settled here—that her mother was to leave England in a month—"

"Oh, very well. Of course, he had no particular fancy for the Willows; but he hated London; had done every thing he had to do; bought the horses, plates, &c. &c. Still it was more for her sake than his own that he made the proposal; but it was always the case with the women—there was no telling what they wanted."

"And then there was Epsom and Ascot for his amusement," Blanche soothingly suggested; "and the drawing-room at which she was to be presented; and she would also like to go to the Opera, even if Anna Stella was not to sing."

This last speech had again the effect of silencing Claud. There was no more said about the Willows; and in a very few days Mrs. Loraine and Mrs. Pierrepont arrived.

The former came suffering evidently under no slight anxiety of mind. She, who knew all about her son's former attachment to the

young opera singer, and had seen the announcement of her appearance at the London Opera, and the account of her mysterious illness.

Her mind was relieved by the aspect of affairs as regarded the young married pair. Her son's manner was subdued—it might be somewhat gloomy; but towards his young wife there was as much kindness in it as could have been desired; whilst Blanche, though there was a certain anxious gravity in her deportment, it was not more, perhaps, than was natural and befitting one who had just entered on the duties and responsibilities of married life, to say nothing of the saddening prospect of her mother's departure, for which active preparations were being made.

I did not think it necessary to disturb Mrs. Loraine's mind, by a relation of what had happened. The storm seemed to have blown over, and no report concerning it might reach her ears; for though there had been no doubt a little talk at the time concerning the appearance of the young married man alone at the Opera

scarcely a fortnight after his marriage, absorbed in the contemplation of the new opera-singer; (to whom many of his continental friends then in the house were probably aware of his former devotion, the mysterious and sudden indisposition of the fair songstress, and the part he had taken in what occurred behind the scenes;)—these sort of affairs are not, I fear, of such rare occurrence in the fashionable world as to make much impression upon the minds of experienced people.

In the beginning of June, my dear young lady was presented at the drawing-room. It seemed but yesterday I had dressed her two fair sisters on a like occasion, and sent them forth with nothing but their grace and beauty to win them favour in the world.

And now went forth my other darling,—a young and wealthy bride, with every circumstance, as far as mortal could discern, to secure her happiness and prosperity.

Should not my heart have been full of happy assurance on her account? Nor did she, as far as personal appearance was concerned, ever look

to more advantage. It is wonderful how much she seemed every day to improve in beauty! Perhaps it might be owing to her dress; for now, for the first time in her life, she gave great consideration to the ordering of her toilet. Of course, with but one aim, poor child!—that of endeavouring to render herself a more meet appendage to her handsome young husband. And Mr. Claud need not have felt ashamed of the bride who stood by his side, when he appeared attired to attend her to the presence of her sovereign.

Her extreme youth was in itself beauty of some sort, and her tall handsome figure well became the court dress; whilst the excitement and novelty of the event gave animation and colour to her countenance, brilliancy to the fine eyes which looked forth, as if for the first time, with conscious pleasure on her position, beneath the sparkling diamonds and snowy plumes which mingled with her jetty hair. In short, Mrs. Loraine Fordyce, the wealthy heiress, was far from wanting admiration on this her first entrance

into fashionable life ; and her husband was more than once congratulated on being the fortunate possessor of so handsome, as well as so richly endowed a wife.

Alas ! not a few might have been struck by the careless surprise with which he received the compliment, and their thoughts have reverted to his very contrary demeanour in the opera-box last Saturday fortnight.

And to the Opera Blanche did succeed in going one evening, though Anna Stella did not sing. But even then, Claud, it appears, kept quite at the back of the box, and did not seem, as Blanche told me, with surprise, on her return, to care at all for the beautiful music.

When, again, Anna Stella was announced for a second appearance, my young lady made another attempt to go and hear her ; but her husband positively declined to be of the party. Of course, she gave it up ; it being also too near the time of her mother's departure to make her very anxious for any amusement. Indeed, at the last, she seemed to

cling to the mother she was about to lose—it might be for ever—with a tenacious sorrow, which made even her husband appear almost a secondary consideration. I thought it a good sign, that during this time Mr. Claud was a great deal in the company of Mr. Leveson; for I knew him, from my brother's account, to be a very superior and excellent young man.

He called at Mivart's after meeting his friend, and his wife, on the day I mentioned their having gone out together. I thought this looked well, not only as, from what I heard of his character, he seemed likely to prove a safe and profitable companion for Mr. Loraine Fordyce (I must sometimes give him the full dignity of his name); but from his having so perfect a knowledge of all that happened in Italy, I felt that it argued well that Mr. Claud should not be shy of his society.

Alas! for all this deceitful show, this false, false peace! It, however, caused my dear late mistress to depart happy and secure, with regard to the daughter she thus abandoned.

And after all, she had two children in India, to whom she considered her presence more necessary, and desirable ; for say what we will, outward circumstances, and what the world calls prosperity, bear much weight in our estimation of the happiness of others. If poverty, sickness, or deprivation, in any bodily sense, had threatened her child, Mrs. Pierrepont would have scarcely made up her mind to leave her ; but she sees her daughter established in health, riches, and position, and now she does so with scarce a pang of fear or self-reproach, as if these adventitious circumstances must ward off every grief, could render a mother's sympathising aid less requisite.

I will pass over the final parting, which, when it came, was more bitter, both to mother and daughter, than could even have been expected. Neither on my own grief will I dwell ; you may imagine, Miss Fenton, what it must have been, when I felt, that in all probability I might never again behold on earth, that gentle, lovely, almost angelic being, from

whom, during the many years we had lived together, I had never received one harsh or unkind word whom times of joy or grief; had equally endeared her; in whose joy I had rejoiced, in whose sorrows I had so fully participated.

“ We had been sad together,
We had wept with bitter tears,
O'er the grass grown graves, which covered
The hopes of many years.”

And we might never perhaps again mingle either our smiles or our tears. She was gone, and I had nothing left, but to turn with heart and soul more than ever concentrated on the last of that loved band which either this world's ocean or the wide sea of death did not divide.

CHAPTER XIV.

It was the very day after Mrs. Pierrepont's departure—Mrs. Loraine had accompanied her friend to Southampton, and had not yet returned to London.

Mr. Claud had offered his services to his mother-in-law, with whom he had also a most affecting parting, but he was not allowed to leave poor Blanche. And much indeed did the dark, deep grief by which, during that succeeding night and following day, she was overwhelmed, need all, that affectionate sympathy could devise on the part of him, upon whom now more than ever, every hope and affection of that devoted heart would be concentrated.

And the young man, to do him justice, I must say, did his best—the best that a wayward selfish heart, and uninterested inclination can affect on such occasions ; and Blanche, in her uttermost grief, clung to his neck, and seemed to find in this consolation, such as it was, all she could desire.

On this very evening I mention, Mr. Loraine came into his wife's dressing-room where she was lying upon the sofa, and asked how her headache was ; then, standing the while with his back towards her, examining the ornaments on the table, whether she had any fancy to go to the Opera.

Blanche looked up in surprise, and said she did not feel certainly much inclined.

“Why not ? it would divert her mind ; do her much more good than lying there thinking—he was going—but if she would rather not—”

He did not finish the sentence, and Blanche, after a minute's pause, asked if Anna Stella was to sing.

“Yes,” he answered shortly, and left the

room. I immediately went up to my child, and told her, gravely and sadly, that I thought she had better go.

"What! to the Opera?" she said with a smile, the first I had seen on her face for some days. "I thought you disapproved of plays, operas, and all those wicked things."

I shook my head sadly, but still I repeated, "I think to-night you had better go."

"You think Claud wishes it?" she inquired. I scarcely knew what to think about the matter, but she interpreted my silence as consent, and immediately, for dinner was ordered earlier, exerted herself to dress accordingly.

I do not know whether Mr. Loraine was pleased or not with her acquiescence.

They set off, however, and after their departure Mrs. Loraine arrived to tell us of Mrs. Pierrepont's embarkation.

She was surprised to find the young couple gone out, and looked not a little anxious when I told them of their destination. She asked me, however, with apparent unconcern, if I was

aware that her son had been an admirer of the young prima donna when in Italy.

I did not attempt to conceal from her the information which I had gained from my brother, telling her all that had occurred the first night of our arrival. But though she could not conceal her anxiety, she tried to treat the affair lightly, and expressed her assurance that all now would be right. I fervently hoped that it might be as she said.

* * * * *

Mrs. Loraine waited until their return, and they were earlier than we expected. Blanche had been quite upset by the music; Anna Stella's singing had been almost too beautiful—she could scarcely listen to it in her state of spirits; and, indeed, had been obliged at last to send Mr. Leveson to find Claud, and ask him to take her home.

“Send to find Claud!” Mrs. Loraine and I both instinctively turned our eyes upon the young man at these last words, with I suppose as much anxious inquiry expressed on our

countenances as if we had spoken it aloud. For he answered quickly, colouring deeply at the same time,

“Yes, I went to speak to some one whom I saw in another box, and could not get back as soon as I wished; or, to tell you the truth, I fell asleep.”

Alas! alas! *was that* the truth? My heart misgave me at the time. Perhaps so did his mother’s also, but she only said, with affected gaiety,

“I wonder you were not afraid to leave your wife to the society of such an agreeable man as Mr. Leveson, and one who is such an admirer of hers.”

And Blanche smiled too, and said that Mr. Leveson was a very kind person—he seemed quite sorry for her, knowing what cause she had for low spirits that evening.

I asked my young lady, when she retired to her room, if the singer she had heard that night was very beautiful.

She answered,

“She is most lovely and graceful, has

something altogether peculiarly interesting in her appearance, whilst from what Mr. Leveson, who was acquainted with her abroad, informed me, she seems to be as good as she is beautiful. I fancied indeed—I do not know if it is anything but fancy—by the way he seemed to avoid speaking much upon the subject, that Mr. Leveson must have been a little bit in love with that Stella. I do not wonder at it at all, for there is something about her so very attractive. And now, perhaps, when I think of it, I could almost imagine that there was something more than acting in the touching tones of her voice, when she sang any thing very pathetic. She looked rather as if she had been suffering from illness, and when not singing, as if her thoughts were wandering far from her part. I even fancied she looked once or twice particularly towards our box, and that made me think still more that there might be some reality in what I imagined about Mr. Leveson. Perhaps Claud will be able to tell me if I am right; though I do not think the acquaintance could have commenced during

the time they were travelling together in Italy, for Claud never mentioned having known this Anna Stella abroad."

"My dear young lady," I said, "it would be as well, perhaps, not to ask any questions on the subject."

And then, as if she thought I was making some reflection upon the young girl's character by this remark, she continued to impress upon me, that Anna Stella was not like the common class of Opera singers, and could not have been originally intended for the stage; for that her father was a professional man, of fortune and repute, but having died insolvent, the mother, formerly governess, and the esteemed friend of Lady Anna Damer, had gratified her own musical tastes and inclinations, by educating her daughter for the Opera stage, and had taken her to Italy for superior instruction; and there she had made her first appearance.

I sighed, and said it was no very kind mother, who, for the gratification of any taste or fancy of her own, could expose her child to

the perils and temptations attendant on such a position.

But Blanche could not quite enter into my views on the subject ; she could not see much danger in any position, for one under the shelter of a mother's protection ; and as for its temptations, she knew, dear child, too little of the world and its wickedness to appreciate rightly their nature and extent.

* * * * *

It was settled that very soon after this, we were to go to the Willows. Mrs. Loraine was invited to be of the party, but she seemed to think it better to leave the young couple, in this early period of their married life, to each other's society, and made arrangements to go herself to Brighton for the rest of the summer and autumn.

We arrived at the Willows in July, in that hot bright summer month—and there was the old place just as we had left it.

We ! Yes, little did we think then how few would be the number, and under what un-

dreamt-of circumstances those few would return. That the bright, careless boy—the warm wild-hearted girl, who had once sprung forth with such eager childish alacrity into that new abode, should now alight before that door, a wedded pair. And I too, then in the full enjoyment of health and vigour, would but in a very few years come back, broken in health, bowed down in mind and body almost to premature old age.

Alas! too, there were not only memories of the past to sadden this return, but sorrow gleaming in the distance, to cast its darkening shadow upon my feelings at this present time.

For we had not left London without much anxiety and fear being revived in my mind on the subject nearest my heart. Claud's attention to his wife had considerably relaxed during the last week or so; he seemed impatient and restless in her society, leaving her often and long to the companionship of his mother.

I perceived, too, the uneasiness and distress this conduct began to occasion my poor

child, and that she rejoiced much in the thoughts of going to the country, where there would be amusements and pursuits in which they could mutually partake; for Mrs. Loraine had told her that it was always much the case in London—young husbands were necessarily a great deal away from their wives, particularly when the latter did not accompany them in public. Next season it would be different, when they had a house, and were able to entertain and mix more generally in society.

I trembled lest she should find herself in any way disappointed in her anticipations—that in the quiet scenes and shades of the country, she might be made only more fully aware of how much was wanting, how far she was from possessing, that which her soul so eagerly desired—her husband's love.

But all went on well for a time. Claud was pleased and excited at finding himself for the first time on his own estate, with the warm welcome given by the tenantry to the young inheritors. It was the very next morning after their arrival, I believe, that walking out to-

gether, Blanche marked out this pretty cottage for my habitation, when the time came, which the doctors had broken to her could not be far distant, that I should be unfit for any active service, and the most perfect quiet, both mental and physical, be required. Indeed, she almost immediately set about its improvement.

Mr. Claud very kindly entered into the plan. He had also a great many of his own at first to occupy his thoughts and interest, and would have set them all on foot immediately, had he not been checked in his movements by the suggestions of Mr. Murray, that until Mrs. Loraine Fordyce came of age, they, as her trustees, did not consider it their duty to warrant any unnecessary outlays or expense. Claud was indignant at this restriction, and cordially abused Blanche's Scotch cousins; nor did she take their part. She had no idea of Claud being thwarted or circumscribed in any of his fancies; she would gladly, I believe, have let him pull the old house to the ground, for the pleasure of building it up again, if he had so desired it.

But no—except in a few minor matters, allowed, as it were, to the young couple by way of pastime—things were to remain just as they were till the heiress attained her majority ; for then, and not till then, would she, or Mr. Loraine, *as her husband* at that time, have full power over her fortune and estate.

“As her husband at that time!” said Blanche ; “why do they always lay such a stress upon those words ? there is nothing said as to the further disposal of the fortune in Mr. Fordyce’s will, so that even were I to die before that time, it would still all be yours, Claud, to do with what you liked.”

“I know nothing about it ; at any rate, the old Scotchman would prevent my ever touching a farthing of it, if it were possible,” Claud added, with a scornful look ; “for I am sure he hates me.”

But Mr. Loraine had started up at the words his kind young wife had uttered, looking affectionately into his face, and turned away uneasily. Ah ! why had that conscious glow spread over his countenance ? that eager flash

lit up his eyes, when she had thus spoken? God forgive him if evil thoughts—guilty wishes were kindled in his heart by the innocent suggestion.

Mr. Loraine was particularly anxious to improve the shooting. It had been hitherto much neglected; but there was sufficient game even now for his own amusement and that of a few friends, and it was for the purpose of inviting these, that he made one of his excuses for going up to London, about a month after our arrival at the Willows.

His absence was prolonged longer than was expected, and Blanche, who from the moment he left her had been wretched, seeming to exist only in the prospect of his return, was almost distracted at each day's postponement of the longed-for re-union.

It was terrible, indeed, to see the increasing tenacity with which the young wife's heart clung round her husband, to the absorption, in her mind and heart, of almost every other interest or affection.

We stood once together near the dark, still

water in the park, I have before mentioned to you, and which I think you say you have already visited.

Suddenly she turned to me, and said with a smile which made my heart thrill painfully, "You remember, Lea, how once I rushed away, threatening Claud to drown myself here, and he thought at first I had really done it, and was very much frightened, I believe, though he pretended afterwards to be only angry. Oh, Lea!" clasping her hands tightly together, whilst that old dark, distressful expression overshadowed her countenance; "I almost think that I should be tempted to do so now in reality, if in any way he were to make me very—very miserable."

"My dear, dear child! I am sure you would not do any thing so wicked," I answered, trying not to make it appear that I took her words too seriously; but how often since have I, with sinking heart and trembling limbs, stood anxiously straining my eyes to watch for her return, after some lonely wandering towards that distant spot.

It was when Mr. Claud did at last come home, that he brought with him the picture, the completion of which had been one plea offered for his protracted absence, it having seldom suited his will and pleasure, whilst in London, to spare time for the required sittings.

What a picture it was !

I believe it was taken by some foreign artist, and certainly I never saw any English portrait that resembled it.

"The face is more like that of an angel !" Blanche exclaimed, in the ecstasy of delighted admiration, "than that of mortal man."

And so it was—looking forth from the delicate ivory, in its bright and almost burning beauty.

"The face of an angel !" yes, I thought, as I too gazed admiringly, and marked how from the flashing eye—the pouting lips—the delicate dilated nostril—the every wave of the clustering hair, the countenance seemed to breathe forth some spirit of no common power. And my brother's observation after the Opera vividly occurred to me.

But what kind of an angel?—ah!

“Fallen cherub, rebel spirit driven
From his first estate.”

Surely with some such image as this the painter's fancy has been busy, when occupied in this his handy work.

But it mattered not whether angel or demon it might appear to others, to Blanche's eyes and heart it was all beautiful, and beloved. The precious miniature encased in its golden frame, and suspended from a costly chain around her neck, was from that moment enshrined nearest her heart, never thence removed but to be gazed upon, or displayed with affectionate and admiring pride.

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. FITZ-HENRY had brought her daughter to London, not without some misgivings as to the consequences which might accrue from her probable re-union with her lover ; but her provisions had not gone so far, as to lead her at all to contemplate the real nature of affairs.

Stella had been successful in the engagements which she had fulfilled during the autumn and winter ; for though she had drooped and pined a little for some days after the departure of her lover, the elasticity of her mind and character soon caused her spirits to rebound whilst borne up on the wings of love, and hope, and happy confidence. Ab-

sorbed in joyful recollections, and still more joyous dreams of future blessedness, imagination seemed almost to supply the real presence of her beloved.

“She loved him, she trusted him,
He trusted her alway;
And so the time flew hopefully,
Though he was far away.”

And thus, without effort, or exertion, or disinclination on her part, her radiant genius carried her through her appointed course with honour and success.

But the most confiding, hopeful spirit cannot exist beyond a certain period, without nutriment of a more substantial nature than that which its own inward powers can supply; some degree of exhaustion must naturally accrue; and so it was finally with Stella. The prolonged separation, the perfect cessation of all intercourse or communication with her lover, began at last to tell upon the young girl's mind and countenance. Even her health showed some signs of failing; so much so,

that Mrs. Fitz-Henry, who had almost relinquished the idea of taking her daughter to England this season, was induced to withdraw this resolution, and take measures for bringing about Stella's appearance on the London stage.

The business was arranged as we have seen, and she was rewarded for her pains by the re-illuminated hope, joy, and eager expectation which almost beamed forth simultaneously in the every look, tone, and gesture of Stella. The first week of their arrival in the metropolis, during which time she, poor girl, had managed, as we have seen, to convey a letter to her lover, was devoted to the necessary preparations for her somewhat suddenly announced *débüt*. The destined night at length arrived, and its fatal particulars have already been detailed to us by Mrs. Lea.

The poor girl, when she was carried home, really thought herself to be dying, from such an excited pitch of joyful hope and undoubting happiness had her expectations been cast down. The blow seemed to have crushed the very

life from her heart, and she lay for many days in a state of torpid misery, from which it was impossible to rouse her.

Mrs. Fitz-Henry was in despair; the disappointed manager furious, for two opera nights passed, and still she would not, or could not, rally; for, of course, the latter deemed there was as much of caprice and obstinacy as real incapacity in the case.

The calls and inquiries at the door were ceaseless, for much disappointment was occasioned to the public by the young and interesting songstress's non-appearance. Lord Duncan, who had come to England determined to patronize the young singer to the utmost of his power, omitted no efforts to soothe and flatter her feelings by every delicate attention he could devise. The choicest fruits and flowers, the newest publications, were every morning sent to Green Street. His carriages placed at her disposal, a *fête* was to be given expressly in her honour; he only waited her convalescence to fix the day for its celebration. Nothing availed; flattery, reproofs, or expos-

tulation could in the least arouse her from her state of pitiable despondency. A change had, indeed, come over the bright being who had hitherto retained, through every sorrow which had approached or threatened her, the sweet cheerfulness, the amiable, hopeful, unselfish serenity which had often upheld, not only herself, but every one in whose behalf she had exercised it. But now, life's every hope seemed wrecked ; she was like the wounded bird struck to the ground with the arrow in its breast—

“No trace

Was left of that sweet gaiety, which once had
Seemed as if no grief could darken, as care
Would pass, and leave behind no memory.”

For the first time she knew what real misery is. She had sprang forward so trusting, so undoubtingly to meet the cruel blow, “and now it had come upon her, and she fainted. It touched her, and she was troubled.”

Overwhelmed by her own great despair, she could feel no concern or sympathy in the disappointment she was occasioning others,

her mother more especially ; an exceeding pity for her own bitter grief swallowed up every other consideration.

It was pitiable to see that late bounding form, now creep heavily to and fro, with pallid cheeks and woe-struck countenance, or crouching in some corner of the room, her untouched, unheeded offerings lying scattered around her, spending hours in torpid gloom, or fits of uncontrollable weeping.

Heart-rending were the tones in which at times she bemoaned her lover's treachery.

" Oh, Claud ! Claud ! and I so loved and trusted you ! Oh, Claud, to deceive me with such assurances of your love, and so soon to forsake, and so soon to forget all that we had been to one another ! Oh, dear mamma," when her mother tried what severe remonstrance would do to bring her to herself, " do not reproach me, if you knew—only could feel, how hard this misery is to bear. Oh, mamma ! mamma ! I ever tried to do my duty and to please you ; why, why am I so punished ? Exert myself — try to sing — impossible ! I

shall never sing again. I am very sorry, but it does not much matter—I shall soon die, and then all your pain and disappointment concerning me, will be for ever at an end.”

But such a state of things could not long continue; a crisis either for the better or the worse must arrive.

Poor Stella might talk of dying, or even go so far as to wish to die. At twenty a first grief, of however acute and desperate a character, however it may have given a shock to the vital soul of happiness, from which it may never wholly recover, is rarely known to be of such immediately fatal consequence.

The Lady Anna Damer was the friend to whose kind assistance Mrs. Fitz-Henry was most indebted for relief in this anxious and annoying emergency. She had been the first to call in Green Street the day after Stella's *debüt*, to congratulate her ex-governess on the very satisfactory fulfilment of her prophecy respecting her god-daughter's success, and to inquire concerning her illness. She found the

proud mother at the height of her perplexity and distress.

The secret of the catastrophe was confided to her ladyship, who did her best to sympathize and assist her friend, supporting the mother in her hope that the very violence of the poor girl's grief was only the test of its more speedy exhaustion, and counselled Mrs. Fitz-Henry to let it have its natural vent. But when Lady Anna called and called again daily, and saw Stella—was eye-witness of the poor girl's sufferings—she was moved with pity, and felt convinced, indeed, that something more than words was requisite to break the spell of misery, whose dark power seemed threatening to overpower the poor victim.

One bright morning she drove to the door in her carriage, and insisted, the plan having been previously concerted with Mrs. Fitz-Henry, in carrying Stella away, without her mother, to a pretty villa she possessed at Richmond.

And there the young girl remained several days. At first, the necessity of rallying and

exerting herself, in some degree to respond to Lady Anna's kind attentions and endeavours to promote her comfort and diversion, was agony to poor Stella. The very song of the birds, the loveliness of the trees and flowers, amongst which her kind hostess made a point of her remaining out almost entirely, the careless merriment of her ladyship's children, the only other inmates of this retreat, seemed but to give a keener severity to her own sense of wretchedness. But her nature was not one long to resist such influences. Insensibly the first bitterness of her grief was calmed ; something more of resignation infused into her feelings. Lady Anna, at the first symptom of a favourable change, with the most delicate tact, and in the most affectionate yet earnest manner, represented to her the bounden duty she owed both to herself and mother, to rise superior to the trial which had come upon her ; to overcome the natural feelings of her heart, and to exert herself to pursue her appointed avocations.

The poor girl's naturally submissive and

amiable disposition yielded gradually to the judicious treatment, and she at length begged to be taken back to her mother, promising to make an effort to recommence her duties at the Opera.

Mrs. Fitz-Henry was accordingly summoned to Richmond, and the whole party returned on the following morning to London.

The very next day Stella went through a rehearsal in a kind of mechanical manner, and made her re-appearance before the London world the succeeding Saturday.

This performance was certainly very different from the first. She acted more like one wound up for the occasion, than with the spontaneous genius which gives its chief charm to her performance. Her voice, too, had lamentably suffered from the effects of all that she had gone through; still the audience were most indulgent, most encouraging; and Mrs. Fitz-Henry forced herself, as much as possible, to subdue the open manifestation of the bitter disappointment and mortification inflicted on her sanguine hopes and fastidious

taste, by what she could only consider as a failure of the most signal nature, and soothe the fit of hysterical weeping which succeeded Stella's exertions, with thanks and commendations. There was little improvement during the few next weeks, and still the same paroxysms of anguish were the distressing sequels of each night's performance.

At last, one evening, whilst driving home, Mrs. Fitz-Henry in grave, disappointed silence, having been more than ever dissatisfied with the aspect of affairs, Stella suddenly leant her forehead on her mother's shoulder, and faltered forth in broken accents, "Mamma, I fear I sing more badly every night—mamma, I cannot help it—he never comes now to the Opera—he should not stay away on my account—I think if he were to come—if I was to accustom myself to see him with his wife too—then I should be better—it would make me stronger—enable me to endure it all more bravely."

"You think so really, Stella," her mother answered, with cold severity; "I really cannot

enter into your feelings, nor can I even discuss such a subject with any patience ; if you cannot exert yourself to sing properly, why I must try to be resigned, and give up the cherished hopes and expectations of years."

And the stern mother actually wept.

* * * * *

We have already seen that Claud could no longer refrain from the guilty pleasure of beholding her whom he still loved with all the unrestrained passion of his selfish heart.

To compromise with his conscience, he persuaded his wife to accompany him ; and seated by her side, or rather behind her, for on Leveson joining their party he retired to the back ground, he looked once more upon the star of his idolatry, dimmed to the eyes of others, but still to his eyes only more lovely and attractive from the change.

And she saw him too—her eyes wandered, as usual, with eager scrutiny over the house, and at length were arrested by the occupants

of a box not far removed from the stage ; and the first accents of dejected languor which had distinguished her voice and gestures were only succeeded by a trembling excitement, a feverish energy, which, though it might not be quite natural in its effect, was, happily, suited to the part she that night played, and gave a more striking character to her performance. But, perhaps, Stella could not long have endured the sight to which her fascinated eyes seemed so constantly attracted ; the sight of him she had adored as belonging to herself alone, seated with his bride—as she had been so often seated—the same to all outward appearance, but oh, how different ! The sullen glare with which, as if he saw her not, his eyes were riveted upon the stage—the almost guilty start—the ungracious impatience with which he seemed to yield attention when his young wife spoke or turned to demand his sympathy in her admiration of the performance—how different, indeed, to his look and deportment towards herself on those occasions. But all this she had not time to ob-

serve. It was enough to see him thus with another—that other his wife.

But the place he filled is suddenly vacant. His bride and his friend are left alone together, the latter still casting wistful glances at the door, from which her husband had hurriedly retreated; and the aspect of her face, when she turned it again towards the stage, was as if a shadow had fallen across it, rendering her more like the plain, dull Blanche she had been led, from description, to have imagined her lover's despised playmate.

At first, alas! a pang of something like jealous disappointment had struck through Stella's heart when she saw the young wife, —she so much handsomer than she had expected—and who, indeed, with her complexion lighted up by the flush of excitement, her fine eyes bright with animation, had been an object of admiration to many.

And Claud had escaped as we have seen, no longer able to endure the sight of Stella under such auspices: he loved her—wretched, unprincipled, young man, as much as ever—

and that dark cloud which interposed between them, in the person of his poor young wife, irritated and maddened him, at length, to an insupportable pitch.

Making some excuse, he suddenly left the box, and by giving the box-keeper a fee, found a place in another part of the house, nor returned till Leveson brought him back. Yes, away from her—the cloud seemed indeed dispersed—he could forget that she was in existence—or, alas ! worse still—begin almost to scorn and reprobate her power. Why, after all, should she interpose between them ? why should he not continue to love Stella, and she love him ? could any hateful tie—a tie imposed upon him by the importunity and interference of his mother—have power to annihilate the cords which bound their hearts to one another ?

Yes ! his mother ; and from the moment this new idea flashed across his brain, he began to throw off, in his imagination, all the odium of the baseness henceforth to her account, not once remembering the share so

largely falling upon his own selfish self; he eased his conscience by laying the whole weight and responsibility of his present and future conduct upon her unfortunate head.

Oh, mothers! what an awful thing it is to have to answer for the sins of your children—sins which your interference, your neglect, your sinfulness have strengthened or engendered.

“Who knoweth what is good for man all the days of this vain life?”

And yet, it is to enhance the value of this vain life—to administer to those three most tempting baits of our adversary—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life—that your best efforts are too often made for your children. And in what does it all end? Not only in bitter self-reproach—but, what is worse, the reproach of those for whom you have toiled and striven with unceasing perseverance; yes, all the misfortunes of a life ascribed to the advice, example, or interference of a mother!

That old fable of *Æsop* often recurs to my

recollection, when I trace the evil influence a parent's conduct has exercised over the destiny of a child. I allude to that of the man who when bound and led to execution, perceiving his mother following among the crowd wailing and beating her breast, begged the officer to be allowed to speak one word in her ear. When she quickly drew near and applied her ear to her son's mouth, *he bit it off*. Upon which she cried out lustily, and the crowd joined her in upbraiding the unnatural son, as if his evil way had not been enough, but that his last act must be a deed of iniquity against his mother. But he replied—

“It is she that is the cause of all my ruin; had not she by her precepts and examples caused me to sin, I should never have so grown in wickedness as to come to this untimely end.”

Oh, well indeed might Mr. Leveson feel pity for the poor young wife—pity, which she had remembered afterwards as great kindness in that moment of discomfort; for from where

he sat, Mrs. Loraine could see her husband, and discern perfectly how his thoughts and eyes were absorbed; and when, at length, overpowered by the music, Blanche could no longer restrain her emotion, he fervently hoped within himself that she might never have more bitter cause for weeping; and when he, at her request, went to find the truant Claud, there was more of real than of playful censure in the tone and manner in which he desired him to come back and look after his wife. And Claud bit his lips, but obeyed him nevertheless.

And Stella, what had been her feelings when she again looked round and saw her former lover's change of place? Was it still in the mere spirit of regretful anguish that the cry at first wrung forth on hearing her mother's direful resolution? "He loves me! oh, he loves me still, I am sure!" struggled once more on her breast, or was one triumphant thrill of pleasure awakened the by suggestion? Oh, if so, stifle it quickly, Stella, lest it lead to guiltier feelings; or why did she, who lately

had abhorred the crimson glow of happy pride she fancied to discern in her fortunate rival's face, now, as she beheld the darkened countenance—the tears—those tears she herself had called forth, now read in it a different history, nay, feel a kind of pity mingled with her former pain?

“Great lady, canst thou be sad?

Then I forgive thee all.”

For might there not be as much of compassion due to the favoured Blanche as to herself, the deceived, the forsaken!

“For what if he loves me still?” again she pondered. “But ah, no! that cannot—must not be.”

And even there—upon that garish stage, poor victim of a mother's vain folly, ambition, or any name that it can be called—melody pouring from her lips, her heart was lifted up in a struggling prayer, against suggestions which to cherish for one instant with the slightest complacency, conscience whispered—to be *sin*.

* * * * *

Claud Loraine Stella saw at the Opera for two or three succeeding nights, and once she even thought to have caught sight of him behind the scenes, when waiting for the carriage, after the Opera, at her dressing-room door.

Another time, she plainly heard his voice laughing and talking lightly to some members of the ballet, and she went home—her heart dying within her, trembling in every limb.

Alas ! he could not approach, nor speak to her again ; for her mother never left her side, and would not have permitted it, even if he desired to do so.

And why should she wish it ? Sometimes she thought that once to have heard from his lips some explanation of his conduct ; an assurance that the past had not been all a dream—that it was the inevitable force of circumstances, not inclination or inconstancy, which had led to his marriage—the restless misery of her heart would be stilled—that she might, at least, be able to resign herself

more apathetically to her fate ; and she felt a vague feeling of disgust and jealousy, towards those careless beings who were made the favoured objects of his passing notice.

CHAPTER XVI.

As may be imagined, the barrier of exclusiveness with which the proud mother thought fit to encompass Stella, was not calculated to gain for the Fitz-Henrys any great good will amongst the opera corps in general. Yes, Stella herself, whose nature was far removed from any thing like reserve or haughtiness, would have entered upon sociable terms with those with whom she was necessarily brought in such close contact ; some of whom amused and interested her fancy by that graceful vivacity of manner and deportment so generally distinguishing foreigners. .

Her own sweet conciliatory bearing, indeed,

went far to disarm any prejudice which might have been otherwise raised against the fine English young lady, whose mother did not condescend to allow to associate with her fellow actors and actresses. And now, when about this time it reached poor Stella's ears, through a young cantatrice, with whom, notwithstanding her mother's wishes to the contrary, she had continued to strike up some degree of intimacy, that she had been at a musical-party, at which Mr. Loraine had been present, a vague unconfessed dissatisfaction arose within her breast at the kind of false position to which her mother had doomed her.

Why had she not been allowed to retain her station as a private individual, in the respectable, happy existence of the middle classes, to which she had been born, and which might have been continued to her, under the peaceful roof of her kind mercantile relations?

And Stella began to write bitter things in her heart against her mother!

But since it had been her misfortune to be forced to embrace such a profession—for now she could, indeed, but regard it in the light of a misfortune—why not, at least, be allowed some of its attendant privileges and relaxations?

Yet she wondered, too, that Claud was to be found at places and in society where his wife could not possibly accompany him! And again she murmured to herself, with feelings softening towards her favoured rival—

“Poor—poor Blanche! What if he does not love you after all!”

But she next heard from her friend Carlotta, who was allowed occasionally to come to Green Street, to practise their parts together, that Claud had left London with his bride; and again the morbid excitement which had begun to give so much life and spirit to her performance vanished. She sank into a kind of apathetic resignation, under the influence of which she was nevertheless enabled to go through the duties of her profession, during the short remaining opera

season, with mechanical precision, which gained her almost equal applause amongst the most scientific of her audience.

- One day, in August, however, when the Opera-house was closed, and London, fashionably speaking, empty,—Mrs. Fitz-Henry, only waiting a certain time, appointed to take her daughter to Lady Anna Damer's place in the country, where they were engaged on a half-friendly, half-professional visit—Carlotta called early, to beg Mrs. Fitz-Henry to let Stella take a walk with her in Kensington Gardens, escorted by her maid, a respectable-looking foreigner.

Mrs. Fitz-Henry hesitated at first; she did not like Stella to walk out without her. But Carlotta begged so hard, and Stella looked so pale, and seconded the appeal with such half-sorrowful, half-sullen earnestness,—for the poor girl was altered of late, even in temper—that at length the mother gave a reluctant consent.

Mrs. Fitz-Henry had formed altogether a good opinion of Carlotta, who, though in a

professional scale far inferior to her daughter, was of respectable parentage, and of irreproachable character. Her father was the leader of the orchestra, and prided himself upon being very particular about this daughter, who, though motherless, rather pretty, and almost entirely her own mistress, yet had ever been supposed to have conducted herself with propriety.

But, alas! alas! the events of this day showed that Mrs. Fitz-Henry even might be betrayed in her dependence on outward character.

* * * * *

Carlotta was unusually silent during the first part of their walk; but when they had entered the park, and were approaching the gardens, she began to talk fast, and in somewhat an incoherent manner.

The two girls, both dressed in quiet shawls, with plain straw bonnets and veils, the staid maid-servant walking behind them, were not calculated to attract much attention. Carlotta

was not particularly striking in her appearance ; and Stella, with her fair face concealed, might have passed only as one perfectly lady-like in deportment. But something in this must have been sufficient to cause the few people she met to turn and look back towards her. Yet, even her very walk was changed. Yes, what is influenced more by an altered tone of mind than the step and walk ? Hers was no longer the hopeful, gleeful-bounding step, propelled by the spirit of youth, and hope, and happy confidence ; but a restless feverish eagerness to gain by bodily action some relief to the worn and burdened spirit—the irritated nerves. The head, which once was held so gracefully erect, the lively eyes, glancing forward in bright and fearless confidence,—now drooped dejectedly on her breast ; and when, having advanced a short way, Carlotta made a pause before a bench, under some trees, the tone of Stella's voice was touchingly languid, as she said—

“ Yes ; let us set down and rest ourselves a little ;” and sinking upon the seat, she raised

her veil, that she might better breathe the air. When she had done this, and again looked up, Carlotta was gone, and Claud Loraine standing by her side. A start, an almost shriek, — and then she hid her face within her hands, trembling with violent emotion.

“Stella, forgive me! but this once I must see—must speak to you. I could not exist any longer without some assurance that you did not think me the vilest wretch the world ever contained.”

“Oh! what matter to you now, what I think? Go, Claud! Go!” rising instantly, shaking in every limb. “Carlotta! where is Carlotta? Oh! why,” wringing her hands, “why has she left me? this is treacherous—this is cruel!”

And Stella was walking desperately away in pursuit of her friend, who had considerably disappeared among the trees.

But Claud Loraine keeping close by her side, supplicated in tones of such heart-touching humility and wretchedness, that she would

wait and hear him but for one moment, that Stella paused, at length, covering her face with her hand, and abandoning herself to a passionate burst of weeping ; and Claud, during this paroxysm, with scarcely any difficulty succeeded in leading her back to the bench, on which she once more sunk despairingly, murmuring in broken accents ;—

“ Oh ! it was strange—it was cruel ! parting as we did ; and then to come and find you—married to another ! that Blanche, too, who you professed to love so little, nay, rather, to despise.”

“ And so I did—I do ! ” was the passionate reply. “ I despise—I hate ! ”

* * * * *

But Stella started to her feet, and gazed at the speaker with eyes flashing indignantly through her tears.

“ I will not hear this,” she cried. “ I will not listen to any thing so wicked. Then it was because she was an heiress ; it was her money that you loved better than myself—better than your honour.”

“Better than neither,” he answered with unblushing vehemence; “there was no love at all in the matter, I repeat. Yes! kill me if you will by your scorn and indignation, but, Stella, I repeat, that I hated—loathed the whole concern. Yet, you see,” he added bitterly, “you see I did it, Stella, for I arrived in England to find I could not have a farthing of the old man’s legacy, unless I made this marriage—to be beset on every side by debts and money involvements. I resisted at first most desperately, God knows; but there was no help for it. What could I do? If your mother had given me the shadow of a hope, I would have continued my resistance to the death, rather than have done this thing; but you know yourself, that this she would not do.”

A sob was poor Stella’s only answer.

“And so,” went on the reckless speaker, “what with every thing combined against me, my own mother and Blanche’s both bent upon the match—Blanche’s foolish love for me—all conspired to drag me down to my fate, be-

wildered, maddened me to an act which has set a stamp of misery on my whole future life, however brilliant and happy, Stella, the course of yours may be."

"Mine, brilliant and happy?" poor Stella murmured, with a wan and wretched smile. "But now, Claud, Mr. Loraine," she said, speaking very faintly, but with firmness, "I have heard you ; I have nothing to say in return, but that I do not reproach you for what is past. Nay, I blame you most for the present ; that being married, you come and seek to exculpate yourself in my eyes by speaking to *me* of your hatred towards your wife. I am not so wicked as to feel any gratification in hearing you speak in such a manner. The past is past ; whether you are to be blamed or not, it cannot be recalled. Believe me, knowing that you are striving to make her, whom you should love, happy, trying to love her, will please me far, far better."

"Oh ! Stella," interrupted Claud, passionately, "you desire impossibilities."

"I do not deny," she continued, scarcely

heeding his interruption, "that I have been very miserable. It was hard to bear at one fell blow the annihilation of all past hope and happiness. But I shall be better now," she continued, speaking with the calm of concentrated feeling, and putting back her hair hastily from her poor pale brow. "I hope that we shall be both better, and endeavour to perform the duties of our several spheres, far removed from one another as henceforth we must be. Let me beg of you to leave me," she repeated earnestly. "I suppose," looking round, "that Carlotta has not quite deserted me—that she will come back when you are gone. But I must never walk out with her again."

"It was not her fault, Stella; she thought she was doing no wrong in effecting this meeting; and, as we are to be *both* so much the better for it," he added, bitterly, "what, indeed, has been the harm? though, *I never* shall be better, Stella, never—never!"

And throwing himself on the bench, he bent his face on his clenched fists, in an atti-

tude of the most desperate despondency. He might, perhaps, have had some faint hopes of being aroused from it, by the same soft touch, and soothing accents of the voice, which had often before calmed, or gently rebuked his inclement moods or ruffled equanimity; but if so, he was grievously disappointed, when, a moment or two after, raising his head, he saw Stella had walked from him many paces; and, as her friend Carlotta was hastening to meet her, he did not attempt to follow, but started off impetuously by a different direction.

* * * * *

Claud fell in with Leveson riding in the park, as he came out of the gardens.

“Why, what are you about here, Loraine?” the latter exclaimed, laughing; “is this the way you get your business done, sentimentalizing at noon in the shades of Kensington Gardens? I shall never get my shooting on the 1st, if matters go on at this rate.”

Then marking his friend's impatient frown,

his embarrassed and conscious manner of receiving this remark, a suspicion flashed through Leveson's mind, which made him look very grave ; for he had passed Stella and her companion, on their way to the gardens ; and, though she had not seen him, he had with some surprise recognized the young singer, whom he had not imagined to be still in London.

He jested with his friend no longer on the subject, but, pleading an engagement, almost immediately rode off.

CHAPTER XVII.

STELLA walked on some distance before she was able to utter one word of reproach or comment on the conduct of Carlotta in this affair.

Indeed, she was obliged to accept her arm, and lean heavily upon it, for hardly could her trembling limbs support her.

At length, Carlotta murmured softly—

“Do not hurry, Signorina; let us sit down till you are able to walk more composedly.”

Then, with a gesture of indignant refusal, Stella faltered forth—

"No, Carlotta; I wish to go home immediately; I could not have believed this of you. It was very, very wrong—I can never trust you again. Oh, what will mamma say?—never, never will she let you visit or speak to me again."

"But you surely would not tell her, Signorina?" Carlotta exclaimed in great alarm; "you would not be so unkind—so foolish, and when I thought I was doing you a kindness, too? I will tell you exactly how it was. Mr. Loraine," she continued, speaking all the time in her own musical language, and erecting her head with no small degree of proud exultation, "called on me a day or two after he returned to town, finding, I suppose, his wife and the country insufferably dull. I just happened to mention your name in the course of conversation, and he asked me some questions about you, which drew him on to say something about your acquaintance with one another abroad, and how he feared you would never forgive him, for his having married without letting you know—that he was obliged

to marry that dark, dull wife, whom I saw at the Opera with him one night. But such an angel in man's likeness as that Mr. Claud Loraine, could never intentionally act falsely towards any one, I am certain; and you, now that you have spoken with him, will be more happy—I am sure you will, *bellissima* Stella,—and smile again less sadly; and then the Signora Madre will be so pleased, and would hardly scold me, even if she knew what I had done. But you will not tell her I am sure, *caressima*—for my sake you will not do so; it would kill me, not to be allowed to come near you again.”

Stella let her talk on, and only wept silently. Her feelings were far too much overcome by this late adventure, to have any energy for resentment, and Carlotta was pretty well satisfied that she was forgiven.

She hesitated, however, when they reached Green Street, whether to accept Stella's not very cordial invitation to enter, but on second thoughts seemed to consider it best so to do.

Stella therefore was able, after just showing

herself to her mother, to make her escape to her own room, there to compose her nerves, and remove the traces of agitation from her countenance ; whilst Carlotta, with the plausibility which had won on Mrs. Fitz-Henry's good opinion, diverted that lady's attention by an account of their proceedings, which, though it might contain nothing positively false, cleverly omitted a great deal that was certainly true. Thus though the benefit which the morning's indulgence had done Stella, was a little belied by the headache that was the consequence, and for which she was obliged to lie down the remainder of the afternoon, it was not attributed entirely to the walk, for her headaches were of such constant occurrence, and the country air Mrs. Fitz-Henry hoped would effectually remove them.

* * * * *

It only wanted three days before the one appointed for their departure. Mrs. Fitz-Henry had been having her picture taken, to gratify Stella. The artist had, generally gone

to Green Street for the sittings, but he wished to put the finishing touches by the light of his own studio. Thus, on the morning in question, Mrs. Fitz-Henry had repaired thither, accompanied by Stella.

The artist was an Italian, just come to England; he had already painted a lovely portrait of the young singer in her brightest beauty, in one of her operatic characters, when abroad.

He was much struck with the alteration in her aspect, since that period; and as Mrs. Fitz-Henry was engaged in removing her bonnet, and making the necessary arrangements in her head-dress, and Stella, more with the air of a suffering angel, than the bright restless creature, who before would have flitted about the room, diverting the tedium of the sitting by her laughing *badinage* and *piquant* remarks, had sank down upon a sofa, in an inner room, connected by open folding doors, with the studio, the artist placed before her on the table, for her amusement, some of his newly-completed performances.

"This one the Signorina may recognize;" selecting a miniature from the rest. "I remember meeting the gentleman at your apartments in Florence; it is to be set in a bracelet, or a locket, to hang round the neck of his lady wife. I expect it will be sent for this morning. Will the Signorina examine it carefully, and give me her opinion? I consider it my *chef-d'œuvre*; but then it would be impossible not to make something of such a beautiful subject."

Placing a magnifier in Stella's one hand, and the picture in the other, which closed over it immediately with convulsive tenacity, the artist had scarcely time to remark the spasm which passed over her countenance; for Mrs. Fitz-Henry's majestic person, in becoming artistic costume, appearing at the door-way at the moment, to announce her perfect readiness, and that in a tone which rather denoted that she was desirous of not being kept waiting, he hurried off, without waiting for the fair young critic's required verdict.

More than half an hour passed, and those

slight fingers relaxed not their tenacious hold ; so tight was it, indeed, that the sharp edges of the morocco case must have pressed painfully into that tender flesh ; but she felt it not, nor did those eyes avert their fixed and fascinated gaze.

Mrs. Fitz-Henry conversed agreeably with the artist, addressing herself once or twice to her daughter, without receiving any answer in return. But imagining her to be reading, or engaged in looking at the pictures, she took no further notice of her silence.

But some one about this time knocked at the door of the room which Stella occupied ; and the artist, apologizing to Mrs. Fitz-Henry, rose, and went out into the passage, returning, however, in a moment, to the table, before which the young lady was seated.

"*Scusate mi, Signora,*" he said, with a flattered smile, on seeing how deeply she was still absorbed in the contemplation of the picture he had put into her hands ; "but the gentleman himself has called for his picture."

Stella, who in her pre-occupation had not, till he spoke, been aware of the artist'

approach, looked up, with a startled, bewildered gaze, scarcely comprehending what was said, almost obliging the artist, divided between his politeness and his haste, to employ some gentle force in extricating the picture from her grasp.

Yes, it was taken away—taken away to be given to his wife; and the anguish of her soul—as slowly and powerfully it awakened from its forgetful trance to the realization of the idea—was reflected on her countenance, and in those mournful eyes, as they now turned desperately from the object on which she had so little right to gaze. The door had opened without her being aware—how then was she startled to observe who had been the witness of her absorption! In the threshold stood the original of the picture.

Yes, too impatient to wait below, Claud had himself ran up stairs almost immediately after his message had been delivered.

Surprise at beholding the occupant of the studio, had at first arrested his progress; and then, when he beheld the manner in which

Stella was employed — when he perceived it was his own image which had almost forcibly been taken from her grasp — a flash of mingled triumph, regret, pity for himself, as well as for her whom he had lost, was plainly visible in the expression of this countenance; and now, when he perceived he was observed, he would have sprung forward to speak to her, had not Stella started up, and with a wild, terrified gesture of entreaty, signed to him that her mother was in the adjoining room, obliging him to desist, and forcing him, whilst the artist was employed in making the miniature ready for departure, to remain gazing at Stella, as she still stood with that expression of beseeching fear upon her countenance, looking from him towards her mother; every other feeling swallowed up at the moment by her terror of the consequences of their meeting.

But when Claud is gone, the sitting renewed, and Stella is left again to herself, she sinks down once more upon the sofa,

with a feeling of even heavier darker desolation than before, as if a dreary blank, a painful void must henceforth be the portion of her weary existence.

And the poor girl buries her face within her hands, and wishes that she might die. Unfortunate Stella ! in whatever religious principles she might have been educated, the doctrines inculcated had not yet led her mind to set its affections on things above, or taught her where to turn for comfort—where to lay the burden of her sins and sorrows ; she had no strength, poor child, but in herself ; and what was that strength, indeed, but utter weakness ? She had not acquired that portion of faith's most difficult lesson—to be “ patient in tribulation,”—resigned to the supreme will, and to feel the dearest of our delights and gratifications must be sacrificed at once, at God's bidding. Ah ! this is difficult to be realized, especially by the young and prosperous—the bright world just opening to their view with all its joyful expectations. But soon—how soon !—will

they know that "in the world you shall have tribulation;" and if they have not a sure "hiding-place from the wind," the storms and tempests so often raging within it will surely overwhelm and destroy them!

Poor Stella had given life's hope to a most fragile bark—an earthly affection;—and, like Schiller's Thekla, she was ready to exclaim—

"What is this life without the life of love?

I cast it from me, since its worth is gone!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

So they went to the Damers, and Stella received much kindness from her hostess, and flattering attentions from the guests. She had been invited to entertain by her singing, and Mrs. Fitz-Henry, even on an occasion when she was on such terms of friendly intimacy with the heads of the house, ever made a point of keeping her daughter's professional position very distinctly in view.

Lord Duncan was amongst the visitors, and so assiduous in his attentions to Stella, that Lady Anna remarked to Mrs. Fitz-Henry, that she was sure her god-daughter

might become Lady Duncan any day she liked.

But the suggestion seemed to create scarcely any greater degree of ambitious pleasure in the mother's mind, than it did in the daughter's, so madly infatuated did she continue in her one absorbing aim, in spite of the annoying *contretems* which had interfered with the fulness of Stella's success during the past season, and she was now only looking forward to her retrieving her character, by a more perfect triumph the ensuing year.

For the better furtherance of this design, it was her intention to attend more to the health and spirits of her daughter, whose professional powers she now found, from experience, so entirely depended upon the condition of those auxiliaries, and to embrace every means and opportunity of amusing her mind, and restoring her languid powers to their pristine life and vigour.

Therefore, with the exception of one oratorio, Stella was to accept no professional engagements.

One visit, indeed, she had to make. which

Mrs. Fitz-Henry certainly did not look upon in the light of pleasure or relaxation.

Her husband's relations in Lancashire having determined to make one more effort to snatch their young niece from further pursuit of a vocation so offensive to their feelings, agreed to overlook the past—forgive the disregard her mother had paid to their former urgent disapproval of the step she had taken on Stella's account, the disgrace already attached to their respectable name and position by the appearance of one of their line upon the boards of the Opera-house—and invite Mrs. Fitz-Henry and Stella to their house, in order to make one more serious appeal to the mother on the anxious subject.

This invitation Mrs. Fitz-Henry, after much deliberation, backed by Lady Anne's advice, decided, but most reluctantly, to accept.

The good people were all much struck, much shocked by the change in Stella's appearance, since the time she had last lived amongst them, a blooming fairy of sixteen. They had heard much of her increased beauty,

and they only saw her grown, as they said, wretchedly thin, nervous, and dejected,—a fine specimen, indeed, of the healthful effects, both upon mind and body, of the career which, through her mother's folly and vanity, had been forced upon her. This was a fine point on which to commence the attack ; but Mrs. Fitz-Henry, far from denying the reality of the alteration in Stella's looks and spirits, attributed it to a slight love disappointment she had met with, to which she might have been as easily exposed in the most private station of life.

Then the good people gravely suggested the possibility of repairing this evil, by marrying Stella, which they would take care to arrange, in spite of the disadvantage of her professional notoriety, to some respectable young man in the neighbourhood.

To Stella, too, they did not neglect to lay siege. The poor girl was perfectly indifferent in the matter. What did it now signify to her in what way she spent the remainder of her existence ? She might as well minister to

her mother's happiness, though her own was for ever departed.

But as to the other manner in which the kind friends proposed to benefit her condition, they by no means found her so apathetic.

They were, no doubt, very good and worthy young men, those who were invited to meet her at the rich merchant's house; and the flattering attention paid to one holding, in her relatives' eyes, so questionable a position, was, no doubt, most complimentary.

Yet, even if it had not been for the state of feeling to which her fatal love had reduced her, her heart could scarcely have responded. Stella's tastes, or rather feelings, had been spoilt by the style of society to which she had been accustomed during her short professional career, to say nothing of the one great *beau idéal*, in whom her blinded eyes saw combined all that was attractive to the sight and agreeable to the heart.

Thus, whilst in the assiduities of Lord Duncan, during her late visit to Lady Anna Damer, there had been something rather

gratifying and soothing than revolting to her feelings, not only from the associations with which his lordship was connected, but from his own individual attributes and attractions. In her present admirers, and one in particular, the younger son of the most opulent retired commercialist in the county, who paid her the greatest attention, there was no attraction which had the power of exciting one pleasurable sensation in her morbidly fastidious fancy. On the contrary, his provincial drawl jarred on her high-tuned ear ; she missed that high-bred ease, that tone, aspect, and conversation to which those who have mixed much in a different sphere, are tempted to become so keenly susceptible, and to value so far above their intrinsic worth and consequence.

Therefore, the young man's proposals for her hand, through the medium of her uncle, were as formally declined by Mrs. Fitz-Henry, as warranted by her daughter.

The elder Fitz-Henrys were dreadfully disappointed. They did not, however, wish to force their niece's inclinations, and promised

her, if she would consent to remain with them during the winter, that other opportunities should be provided for Stella's respectable establishment in life, to which she might be inclined to give a more favourable attention.

Then Mrs. Fitz-Henry was forced to explain that she was not at present desirous of any such establishment for her daughter,—that it was her wish that she should continue in a profession she had taken such pains to fit her for; and, thanking them gratefully for their hospitality and kind intentions, communicated her purpose of leaving them at the end of the month, her arrangements having been made accordingly.

As for Stella, she was much pained to witness the disappointment and concern her father's kind relatives evinced at her mother's verdict; and when they, as a last resource, appealed to their niece most affectionately and earnestly in her own behalf, she threw herself upon the bosom of her warm-hearted aunt, and tearfully assured her that it was not for her own gratification that she desired to con-

tinue in the public career her mother had chosen for her.

“No, indeed, dear aunt and kind uncle,” she sobbed forth. “Though in the first flush of youth and happiness, joined with my natural love for the art itself, I may have found pleasurable excitement in its pursuit, since sorrow has visited me, I have been brought rather to loathe its publicity, and to feel how little a weary heart was compensated for exertions often made with agony to its own feelings, by the plaudits they drew down upon me. How often, in the very height of success, would I have gladly hidden my face—shut my aching eyes from the gaze of multitudes, sighing deeply for the privacy now afforded me; the sheltering protection of some friendly arm, to lead me for ever from the scenes of my glittering trial.”

“Then why not stay with us, dear niece?” urged the kind relatives; “here is a home for you—a home, at least, of respectability, of comfort, and of peace.”

“But my mother!” Stella expostulated; “I am her child, her only child, and I am

under her sole control. You know, dear uncle, I want three years of being of age. Even if I wished to leave her, I am powerless to do so, without her consent. And were I free, would it not be cruel—ungrateful to do so—to give the death-blow to her cherished hopes and expectations ?”

But still the worthy couple argued that not even filial duty can excuse a person for persisting in questionable and perilous paths. “And surely even your limited experience,” they urged, “must have shown you that the life is one of peril and danger, from which even the most virtuous and strictly guarded can scarcely pass without pollution of some kind, if it is only the contact which you must inevitably be brought with impurity and vice. My good girl, remember that, ‘Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,’ is, or ought to be, our daily prayer ; what then can justify you in courting temptation in its most deadly form ; in exposing yourself to evils, worse than any you perhaps have ever contemplated ?”

Stella's heart thrillingly responded to this latter part of the appeal, and :—

“Oh, my God, lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil,” was the emphatic utterance of her inmost soul, as her tender conscience started back aghast from the thought of that evil ; that fiery temptation too likely to await her, in those scenes to which her mother destined her to return.

How was it then, that this last opportunity, given her, it would seem, to free herself, like a bird from its snare—a struggle, by the success of which so much of sin and misery might have been spared—was finally overcome? Alas ! that it should have been through the influence of a mother.

Her friends told her, if she declared to Mrs. Fitz-Henry her disinclination to the stage, she could not, either in right or reason, oblige her to act ; that, in a worldly point of view, they would take care that she should be no loser by the sacrifice of her infatuated mania.

But alas ! in a subsequent interview with her mother, Stella's fate was ultimately de-

cided ; a few days more, and she had departed from that quiet home and the friends who had stretched forth their saving hands in vain—for ever.

CHAPTER XIX.

LONDON was again alive with fashion and gaiety when we arrived there in April, to establish ourselves in a house in Belgrave Square, Mr. Loraine having preceded us some weeks, to make, according to his plea, preparations for his wife's reception.

Mrs. Loraine had been staying at the Willows during her son's absence, and accompanied her daughter-in-law to London, from thence to proceed immediately to Germany with a sick friend.

But Blanche's confinement was expected in June, and she would certainly return to be in attendance on that auspicious occasion.

With what hopeful pleasure we hailed an event, which all most interested in those it concerned, trusted would prove a sweet bond of union, and contribute so much to strengthen and establish the affection of the young husband towards his idolizing wife.

Blanche would not, of course, be able to go out much this season. She only intended, she said, to go to the Opera; but there was one invitation which Mrs. Loraine saw no reason she should not accept.

It was a concert given by Lord Duncan, and would afford the greatest treat to those who were fond of good music. Mr. Claud said not a word; and when my young lady asked him whether he had intended going, answered shortly, that he did not know. But, nevertheless, when the appointed evening arrived, they both went.

Mrs. Loraine Fordyce returned pleased apparently with the entertainment, although a shade of thoughtfulness, I fancied, sometimes mingled with her liveliest descriptions.

She told me that Anna Stella had been there amongst the singers.

"She did not, however, sing much," Blanche added. "Lord Duncan, fond as he is of music, seemed very reluctant to fatigue her—indeed, treated her much more like a distinguished guest than a professional performer. Do you know, Lea, that they say he admires her very much? Some think he would marry her, for he is mad upon the subject of music; and, I believe, though a very charming person, is considered eccentric, or perhaps, properly speaking, independent in his ways of proceeding. But I hear that, strange to say, Anna Stella's mother gives him no encouragement. She, I suppose, must also be infatuated in the same way as his lordship, for she sacrifices every consideration to her daughter's professional career. I wonder if she likes it herself, poor girl! I do not fancy she looks happy, though there is naturally something peculiarly and animated about her; but," she added, with a half sigh, "it would take a great amount of sorrow to dim her brilliancy. Stella! it is, indeed, the right name for her; for you know, Lea, it is the

Italian for 'Star,' and very starlike certainly she is. She wears such a lovely diamond ornament of that shape on her head, I could scarcely take my eyes off it, flashing so beautifully as it did at every moment beneath the brilliant lamplight. And she had one also of the same shape in the front of her dress, only still more magnificent, a sort of brooch."

"I wonder where *that* came from?" I thought. I had heard the history of the other. "But I hope, indeed," I continued to ruminate, "that Mr. Claud has not been so wicked as to give her another present."

"She is so beautiful, Lea," Blanche repeated, mournfully, "such a faultless figure, and so lovely a complexion; though her hair and eyes are dark, her skin is white as marble, and a most brilliant colour—beautiful, most beautiful!" And then she was silent for a few minutes, as if sunk in a deep reverie.

But soon she resumed—

"Lord Duncan seemed very much pleased to lead her about, and all the company looked at her a great deal, but many seemed rather

offended by his paying her so much attention, and said, 'Such a fuss about an opera-singer!—quite improper; but it is just like Lord Duncan, with his musical fanaticism.'

I was longing all this time to hear something of Mr. Claud's conduct on this occasion; but, of course, I could put no direct question on the subject; I, therefore, merely asked if no one had spoken to the young singer excepting his lordship.

"Oh, yes," she answered, "Lord Duncan presented her to several of the company; and I was leaning on Mr. Leveson's arm, when Lord Duncan stopped to speak to us, with Stella leaning on his.

"I should have been introduced to her, and felt inclined to ask Lord Duncan to present me; but I do not know how it was, Stella suddenly had turned so deadly white, her countenance looked altogether so agitated, that I gave up the intention. It might have had something to do with Mr. Leveson, who did then look a little strange, and drew me quickly on. He, however, had bowed, and

spoken kindly, but rather coldly, I thought, to her when they first met."

"And Mr. Claud?" I ventured now to enquire.

She started a little, I thought, and looked at me with something of that expression to which I have before alluded.

"Oh, Claud!" she, however, replied, "*he* did not *speak* to her—at least, I did not see him;" and though there seemed, by her tone, something more on the subject to have been left unsaid, she broke off abruptly, and discontinued the conversation.

Had there been anything in her husband's conduct on this occasion? or had any idle whispers reached her ears respecting his former intercourse with Stella, to awaken uneasy suspicions in her mind?

If not, there was certainly something remarkable in the manner in which she seemed to concern herself in the young singer. She never came from the Opera without speaking to me of her with the same anxious interest she testified after Lord Duncan's concert.

I learnt from her, that the musical world was a little disappointed in Anna Stella's performance this year.

She had been a novelty last season ; and the personal interest her youth and beauty had excited, made up for any professional deficiencies she might possess. Now, though the general interest was in no ways diminished, those who were quite connoisseurs, and cared for the singing more than the singer, were a little inclined to grumble.

Anna Stella evidently did not enter into her vocation with that full life and earnestness which was so necessary to constitute perfection in any pursuit, and this was such a pity, considering the great capabilities, the splendid voice of the beautiful songstress. "She went through her part," the disappointed critics would add, "more as a child might perform some task." Sometimes, indeed, with too much apparent effort. Her voice ever exquisite in its tone, at intervals quite magnificent, was at other times not powerful enough to fill so large a house. Such uncertain dis-

appointing singing would do for "Lady Duncan," which she seemed likely very soon to become. They would listen to her with pleasure at Duncan House; but to do full justice to the compositions of Rossini and Bellini, on the boards of the Italian Opera House, some more sustained and vigorous powers were required to be brought into action.

* * * * *

And how did Mrs. Fitz-Henry bear all this? Why, better, perhaps, than could have been expected, all things considered; or, at any rate, she allowed no outward demonstration to reveal the bitterness of the disappointment, —this melting away of her favourite, her long-cherished aspirations, this death-blow to the hopes of her proud, determined spirit!

Towards Stella it might be betrayed by the severity, the hardness, which her manner displayed; but to others she bore herself haughtily on the subject, throwing out occasionally dark hints respecting her daughter, which seemed to convey the idea, that pro-

spects were opening before her, which might render Stella independent of professional celebrity. She alluded, of course, to Lord Duncan's remarkable attentions.

Had her mind really brought itself to bend from the point it had so obstinately taken, crossed in her hopes and expectations, disappointed in her daughter's failure in obtaining that pre-eminence in the sphere of art she had so ardently desired for her? Was she reluctantly compelled to fall back on what she—infatuated woman!—considered the lesser triumph which would attend her exaltation to a high place in the circles of society?

However it might be, from this period she certainly began to favour the advances of Lord Duncan towards Stella.

On the morning of the assembly at his house, of which Blanche already has given some account, a jewel case had arrived, in which was found a diamond star, set as an ornament for the bosom of her dress, the brilliants of which it was composed being far

superior in magnificence to the one she usually wore in her hair.

With it came also a note from Lord Duncan to Mrs. Fitz-Henry, in which he earnestly requested her to allow her daughter to accept the accompanying tribute, and to wear it that evening, for he had endeavoured that it should match, as far as possible, the star which generally adorned her fair head.

“I have often been reminded,” the note went further to say, “when I have seen it flashing so brightly there, the object of general admiration, of an old oriental superstition, now held, I believe, by the Irish peasantry—I allude to the custom of attaching some conspicuous ornament of apparel to the person, especially of the young and beautiful, with the hope that the bright colour of the garnet, or the brilliancy of the adamant, might avert the evil eye from the wearer’s countenance; the attention being taken from the beauty of the person to that of the dress or ornament.

“In some such auspicious influence may my present offering have a share. May no

evil genius ever approach to injure the lovely owner ! whilst, to lay aside all metaphor, too proud and happy shall I be if any gift of mine may be allowed a place not only on her head, but on her heart."

Mrs. Fitz-Henry grimly smiled on the gift, and the flattering conceit which accompanied it, and seemed to expect Stella to do the same. But she, on the contrary, burst into tears.

"You do not mean me to wear it to-night?" she sobbed.

"And why not, pray? it is only due to the generous giver to pay him that compliment in his own house. And besides, it will match beautifully with the other star, which I intended certainly that you should wear."

"Oh ! not to-night, mamma ! I cannot wear *that* to-night."

Again Mrs Fitz-Henry looked with angry wonder at her daughter. She had never suspected the real donor of that appropriate offering. Of course, she imagined it was Lord Duncan, the only one of Stella's admirers she had deemed likely to proffer so costly a gift,

and had often of late been puzzled by the dislike Stella evinced in wearing it.

But now she sternly desired her either to explain her reason for this childish caprice, or that she should appear with it that evening.

The former alternative Stella could not bring herself to embrace.

She had not courage to tell her mother that she had deceived her so long on the subject of the star ; as little courage to say the words which would too surely deprive her for ever of that still too precious relic of her first love.

Therefore, though she knew that *he* would be there that night, that she must pass before him, his glittering token flashing mockingly in his eyes, exciting perhaps unwarrantable imaginings in his mind, she was compelled to submit to the other, and deck that night both brow and bosom with those two bright ornaments.

“Bright gems were in my hair—
How I hated their brightness !”

Yet scarcely did she know which of those

two she hated most ; for if to wear the conspicuous gift of him she must not love was bitter—to wear that of one she could not love, was bitterer still. And few who marked the rich red glow upon her cheek, the sparkling radiance of her eyes, knew that it was the fire of painful excitement rather than the natural radiance which had once adorned them.

For too, too surely *he* was there, with his eyes,

“Those eyes of most unholy blue,”

continually upon her wherever she turned—wherever she moved she met them fixed upon her ; or, as it sometimes seemed to her, raised in mocking triumph to the star which now seemed beaming on her brow.

Oh, would that it could indeed have proved the charm of which Lord Duncan had spoken, to avert from her the baneful power of that gaze !

* * * * *

And Stella stood face to face with Claud's young wife, who smiled so kindly on her ; and

Mr. Leveson—he had looked on her as coldly, nay, she almost fancied, sternly ; and he who knew all, ought he not rather to have pitied her? For what had she done? what was she but most miserable? Could she help turning so faint and pale before the Blanche who had so innocently robbed her of her peace and happiness?

But it was worse than all, when once suddenly she perceived Claud, either by design or accident, close by her side. It was in the refreshment-room where Lord Duncan had taken her.

His lordship had left her for a few moments to speak to some great personage who had just entered the apartment.

“ A rival star ! oh, Stella ! ” he whispered in her ear, “ I never thought it would come to this.”

She raised her hand faintly to her head, her blanched lips murmuring, as if in apology, “ It was not my fault—it was my mother.”

“ Yes Stella, and *my mother* ! they have done much for us—for our happiness, certainly.”

"I meant—I meant," she faltered, "that I wore the star because—"

"Oh never mind the star," he interrupted, in the same concentrated tone of passionate bitterness, "wear it—wear it for pity's sake, Stella. Let me sometimes see it there; whatever other gifts may glitter upon you, it is like the last ray—my last gleam of consolation—of hope."

* * * * *

Lord Duncan returned—repossessed himself quickly of Stella's arm, fearing, with much anxious *empressement*, that she found the room too hot, spoke a few careless good-natured words to Claud *en passant*, a flash of something like triumph lurking at the same time in his handsome eyes; and drew the now pale and trembling Stella through the crowd into the cooler saloon, the guests making way for the exit of their host and his lovely companion, the exciting cause of many an envious pang that night, though "did people really think that Lord Duncan would carry his fanaticism so

far as to marry a mere opera singer?" many sneeringly enquired; "this is not the first he has courted and spoilt by his adulation; wait till another more brilliant star eclipses the Stella."

* * * * *

Mrs. Lea had not been far wrong, when she fancied that Blanche might have heard something that night to awaken uneasiness in her mind.

First of all, she—whose eyes never for very long lost sight of her husband, however little he might attach himself to her side—could not fail to make something of the intensity and constancy with which his gaze seemed attracted towards Stella. It was under the excitement of some vague feeling of uneasiness, with which this observation filled her mind, that in spite of the fancy which formerly influenced her concerning Mr. Leveson himself, and the present object of her curiosity, she turned to that gentleman, on whose escort she found herself so often thrown, on occasions like the present, and asked him, rather ab-

ruptly, when it was that he had known Anna Stella abroad.

Taken rather by surprise, the young man replied somewhat incoherently,

"Oh, I think it was first when travelling through Switzerland; and then—at Florence."

"And Claud," she continued, interrogatively, "he, I suppose, met her too?"

"Oh, of course," Leveson stammered rather faintly, much at a loss how to continue his answers to these most awkward questions. He saw plainly that the poor young wife's eyes were at length opened in a great measure to the state of the case.

How could it be otherwise, when she looked into the countenance of the unworthy Claud, who scarcely made an effort to conceal the feelings which ought so long ago to have been banished from his heart?

How miserable is vice, when one indulged and guilty feeling is capable of creating so much misery to oneself and others! How unavailing is prosperity, when, in the height of

it, a single disappointment can destroy the relish of all other advantages !

Leveson was too glad to be able to direct Blanche's attention to some celebrity amongst the company she was desirous to have pointed out, who just then happened opportunely to pass by.

But she could scarcely have failed to observe his embarrassment, and his excessive eagerness to change the subject.

CHAPTER XX.

MR. LORAINÉ had been very busy during the winter fitting out a yacht for his summer amusement. It had been partly the business which had taken him so early from the Willows, and now he was constantly running down to see after the equipment of the vessel, in which he intended to set out on a cruise immediately after Blanche's recovery, leaving her somewhere on the coast, under the care of his mother, if unable to accompany him in the expedition.

I think I once before alluded to the violent fancy Mr. Claud had shown, when quite a boy, for everything belonging to the sea.

When questioned by his mother concerning his choice of a profession, his answer would always be,—

“I shall either be a sailor or a gentleman, nothing else; for a gentleman, at all events, can have a yacht; mind, if you will not let me be a sailor, I must have a splendid yacht when I am a man.”

One of Blanche’s proudest anticipations, on the prospect of her marriage, had been the power she would possess of being able to procure for her husband this long-talked-of yacht, and making it as perfect of its kind as any vessel that had ever before left the harbour of Cowes.

It was well, indeed, that he had such diverting interest and occupation, for his spirits and temper were anything but what they should have been; and that some evil spirit, some distracting passion was struggling within his breast, was but too plainly evinced by his manner and deportment towards his wife, at a period, too, which ought to have disarmed every feeling but that of considerate anxiety on her account.

Fortunately, either that her own mind was too full of happiness at the prospect of becoming a mother, or from her having been from childhood so well accustomed to be *snubbed* by Claud, she seemed to feel and observe his cold, uncourteous manner far less than I did, with my jealous tenaciousness on her account; particularly as I could not fail to connect the conduct of Mr. Loraine with the reports that were afloat, which, through my young lady herself, and also from my brother, who was still in London, reached my ears, as to the certainty of Anna Stella's marriage with Lord Duncan.

Indeed, it was rumoured that she was about to leave the stage immediately, in anticipation of the event.

* * * *

"What name, Loraine, have you fixed upon for your yacht?" Mr. Leveson said one morning, when he was calling on the Fordyces.

"The Lost Pleiad," Claud muttered, gloomily, "is the best I can think of."

“Does not that sound rather unlucky?” Blanche enquired, addressing Mr. Leveson.

He smiled at the earnest simplicity with which she asked the question, and remarked, that he saw very plainly that Claud would have to alter that name, if he expected her to have one moment’s peace of mind when he was absent on his cruizes, whilst the other visitor, a very young man, suggested the appellations of “the wandering star,” “the fallen star,” and every other sort of star in the firmament, by way of amendment.

“Talking of stars,” he added, “we shall very soon, if report speaks true, be losing a very bright luminary from the Opera boards, at least, for *I* call her a real star!” he exclaimed, “whatever the critics may say. No wonder she was inclined to give herself airs, and not exert herself to sing her best, with such prospects before her. I allude, of course, to the report, that the beautiful Anna Stella is to be the future Lady Duncan.”

“Oh, is that really to be?” demanded Blanche, eagerly. But she paused, aghast, on

meeting her husband's eyes turned upon her with an expression which struck a cold chill of dismay into her heart.

What did it mean? What had she done or said? It was more than anger—more than scorn—more than any of the unamiable or unflattering expressions, and they were many, which, from her childhood, she had been taught to receive without complaint or astonishment.

What made his eyes flash so fiercely on her? Why his cheek become so livid?

Was it hatred these signs expressed? and what had drawn such feelings forth at this particular moment? Could it be that simple question?

What was it to him if the Opera singer was to become the wife of Lord Duncan? And Blanche turned her eyes with wistful surprise towards Mr. Leveson, her constant friend in need; their startled enquiring expression seemed to say,—

“What *does* all this mean?”

But he was looking on the ground with an air of concern and disapproval.

Mr. Loraine had, in the meantime, started up, and walked to the window ; but the unconscious visitor saw nought of all that was passing, or, at any rate, proved himself to be one of those unfortunate beings who seem bent on pursuing a subject they may have started, unmindful of the effect it may produce.

“What beautiful ornaments the fair Stella wears !” he continued ; “those diamond stars are the envy of all the fine ladies in London ; connoisseurs say, the brilliants of the brooch she wears are splendid—the gift of Lord Duncan, of course, and a pretty device it is. Few other people could afford to make such presents. Well, in my opinion, this Anna Stella, or rather, we ought now to call her Miss Fitz-Henry, was born under a lucky star—‘The Lucky Star !’—ah ! now, Mrs. Fordyce Loraine, that would undoubtedly be a much more propitious name than the ‘Lost Pleiad,’ for your husband’s yacht.”

“Oh, confound the yacht, and everything belonging to it !” now burst from Claud’s lips with such rude vehemence, that the poor youth,

who fancied he had been making himself all this time very agreeable, looked quite aghast, and rose hurriedly to take his departure.

Claud, too, snatched up his hat, exclaiming—

“I am going out; are you coming, Leveson?”

And Leveson coldly acquiesced. He took, however, a kind leave of Blanche, who sat looking stunned and stupified.

Mr. Leveson often put his friend rather to shame—if any such feeling existed in him at this period—by the various kind attentions he was continually paying his neglected wife.

Claud would say to her, half in scorn, half in jest—

“Leveson, I verily believe, is in love with you, Blanche.”

And she would answer quietly, but with somewhat of gentle sorrow in her tone—

“Can *you* think that possible, Claud?”

“What possible?”

“Why, that any one *could* be in love with me?”

But even this delicate and touchingly implied reproof procured her nothing but a careless compliment on her humility.

* * * * *

Blanche had from a child been extremely fond of animals; and the last summer had been very anxious to possess a little King Charles' spaniel, such as she had seen belonging to a lady of her acquaintance.

Claud promised to look out for one for her, but had always neglected to do so; and it was Mr. Leveson who had this year, immediately on her arrival, brought one for Mrs. Loraine Fordyce's approval, whose singular beauty and diminutive size excited her liveliest admiration and delight.

"But I do not think I shall prize you quite as much now, little thing, as I should have done a short time ago," she said, caressingly, as the pretty creature lay nestling on her knee.

“You will now have but a short reign of it; something better than a dog will own this place here very shortly—what shall I do with you then, I wonder?”

But, in spite of these anticipations, she was very fond of it; and dire was her distress, when one fine day the little dog was missing.

Watched and guarded almost as a child, it was wonderful how such a thing could possibly have occurred; but gone certainly it was.

Claud happened to be at Southampton; but through Mr. Leveson, who was immediately sent for, every step was without delay set on foot for its recovery—an end which was brought about in a most unlikely and unexpected manner.

I mention the circumstance chiefly, as you will see, from its having procured for me an opportunity, which I should probably never otherwise have had, of beholding the being so intimately and fatally involved in the interests of the story.

* * * * *

I went out shopping with my young lady one morning, two or three days after her loss of *The Little Countess*, as the dog was called. We ended by going to the Pantheon, where she wanted to ask a question about some foreign birds she had lately purchased ; and also, dear child ! to give me the treat of seeing the flowers, for which she knew so well my liking.

There was not a very great crowd about the bazaar at that early hour ; but a gentleman, of very handsome and striking appearance, was at the extremity of this particular department, engaged in earnest conversation with one of the people of the establishment, apparently on the subject of some purchases he was making, and a tall, elderly lady was by his side, to whose opinion he seemed constantly to refer with the utmost deference. Mrs. Loraine did not, I think, perceive them at first, she was so occupied in looking at the birds, and I myself was soon more interested, even, than with the flowers, in watching a graceful creature in the shape of a young lady, simply but elegantly

dressed, who was flitting about the place in a kind of dreamy, restless manner, seeming not to pay much heed to the brightness and beauty of the objects around her. There was a melancholy fixedness of expression in her wild, dark eyes, and care and sorrow in the lines about her mouth, which contrasted strangely with the bright hues upon her cheek and lips, rivalling the brilliant carnation of the flowers she held in her hands, whilst in her arms she gently carried something half concealed in the folds of her light summer mantle, but which, from the occasional caressing movement of her hand, was evidently some living creature. At length, the wanderings of the young lady having brought her nearer to the spot where we were standing, Blanche, whose attention was for the first time riveted upon her, showed, by her sudden change of countenance, immediate signs of recognition.

But almost at the same moment the sound of a shrill bark, and the apparition of a singularly small black head, graced by a pair of

long curling ears, and wonderfully large eyes issuing from amongst the delicate drapery of the lovely lady's mantle, caused my dear child to spring forward with the eager exclamation of, "My Little Countess!"

The young stranger's progress being thus arrested, I saw her cheek lose in a moment all its former brilliancy; very quickly, however, she relinquished the little dog into the arms of its eager claimant, and stood with a kind of stunned, bewildered expression of countenance, whilst Blanche warmly caressed the Little Countess, who gave vent to the most vehement, and no doubt hypocritical manifestations of joy at its restoration to its original mistress, for no more contented and comfortable a little creature in the universe had probably existed a few moments before, when resting so fondly on the fair arm of its new owner.

Then Blanche, still eagerly, but with some conscious embarrassment, began her explanations on the subject.

She was very sorry, but it was her dog—she had lost it but a few days before; had

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been in the greatest distress about it ever since ; had taken every means for its recovery. She could only hope that Miss Fitz-Henry, having had the little creature so short a time in her possession, would feel less regret at parting with it now, than had it been longer hers.

“Pray do not mind—it does not at all signify,” was in low, faltering accents the young lady’s reply ; and she also attempted some hurried explanation, in which, though too agitated to make it very intelligible, Lord Duncan’s name was audible ; whilst at the same time, she cast anxious, wistful glances towards her friends in the distance, the lady and gentleman to whom I have alluded, and who, almost immediately observing that something was amiss, approached eagerly to her rescue.

Lord Duncan instantly recognized Mrs. Loraine Fordyce, appearing at once to comprehend what had occurred, and having, most politely, listened to her eagerly-repeated explanation, could do no less than acknowledge, with courteous readiness, her undoubted right

over the recovered favourite, proceeding, on his part, to give an account of the manner in which it had come into his hands. .

“I must confess to the delinquency,” he smilingly said, “of having for some time been pandering to the iniquities of the dog-fanciers (I fear we must call them by their proper names, dog-stealers), by offering a large bribe for the most beautiful and diminutive of the King Charles’ breed which could be procured ; and I esteemed myself very fortunate, when, the night before last, a little creature, in every way so perfect, was brought for my approval, and offered at a price, too, which certainly made me suspect the nature of the means which had been employed in my service. I have, however, been punished, you see,” glancing at Stella, “by the disappointment I have occasioned, and also for the annoyance I have caused to Mrs. Loraine Fordyce. And you, Anna,” going up in the most affectionate manner to Miss Fitz-Henry, who now stood with downcast eyes and dejected mien by the side of her severe, proud-looking mother, a

sort of woman toward whom I at once took a dislike—"you must not be too sorry for the loss of this little creature ; if there is another to be found equally beautiful in England, nay, in all Europe, it shall be yours ;" and then with another graceful smile to Mrs. Loraine Fordyce, he proceeded to make inquiries as to how and where it had been procured ; and as he seemed to take it for granted that her husband had bought it for her, and she forbore to undeceive him on this point, Lord Duncan brought in Mr. Claud's name several times in the course of the discussion. When he did so, I saw the colour suffuse Blanche's countenance, and her eyes turn with a kind of stealthy, anxious, scrutiny towards Miss Fitz-Henry. But she could see nothing there, unless it were, that the young girl's features were more fixed and rigid in expression, and her eyes more firmly riveted on the ground.

At length, when his lordship had finished all that he had to say upon the subject, my young lady, with the little dog still in her arms, and a certain simple dignity of manner

which was becoming habitual with her, blending strangely sometimes with her otherwise almost childish simplicity of words and actions, went up to Stella, and looking, I thought, with peculiar earnestness into her face, said gravely but kindly—

“Miss Fitz-Henry, I regret very much to be the means of depriving you of this little treasure. I fear,” with a half sigh, “that you must have become fond of it—even in this short time—Countess was evidently beginning to be fond of *you*—glad as it pretended to be, little hypocrite, to see me again; would you not like to kiss the little beauty before I take it away?” and she held it up as if for Stella to take it in her arms.

But the silken paw had, in its excited demonstrations, become entangled in the chain around its mistress’s neck, and Blanche had to draw up her picture locket, which hung to it, for the more speedy extrication of her pet.

Stella had mechanically put out her hand to stroke the little animal’s head, but there seemed something in the sight of this orna-

ment which caused her to withdraw it abruptly, and turn away with such a pained and shrinking—almost petulant gesture—that Blanche, when the dog was released, and the picture restored to her bosom, did not repeat the offer, but with a look of cold constraint, bowed her head, as if to bring the interview to an end; whereupon Lord Duncan, having addressed to Mrs. Loraine Fordyce a few more courteous speeches, passed, with the two ladies, from the conservatory. I saw him draw Miss Fitz-Henry's arm within his own, and bending over her with an air of most lover-like devotion, was probably endeavouring to console and resign her to the annoying misadventure.

Alas! I had seen enough of the poor girl's countenance to discern that some much more serious grief and pain was at her heart than any that the loss of a little dog could have excited, or which his lordship, I feared, possessed power to allay.

CHAPTER XXI.

BLANCHE was very silent and thoughtful during the first part of our drive home ; her delight even at the recovery of her pet seemed to have evaporated. At length she said anxiously—

“ You know, Lea, that that was Anna Stella ; it is evident she is engaged to Lord Duncan. Did you hear him call her Anna ? I suppose she will in future drop the ‘ Stella,’ as she will her professional celebrity. Not that I think Lord Duncan will much care for that. It is very strange,” she continued, after another pause, and in the same thoughtful, anxious manner, “ that she should have

had my dog. Do you think, Lea," her eyes anxiously fixed on my face, "that she is so very beautiful?"

"Beautiful, my dear," I said, "she is certainly a very lovely young creature; but she looks, poor thing," I added, "far from happy."

"No, indeed, far from happy," Blanche repeated, musingly; "why not, I wonder?—she is going to make such a splendid marriage too—but then, after all, she may not love Lord Duncan.—Oh, Lea," she added, bursting into tears, "people, you know, do marry sometimes those they cannot love."

"My dear child," I said, soothingly, "what do you mean?"

"Nothing—nothing, Lea," she sobbed. "I do not like to speak of these things even to you; but sometimes such strange fancies come into my head about this Stella; do you know, Lea, that Claud knew her abroad, yet has never told me a word about it? I should not have known this much, but I questioned Mr. Leveson about it, and even he, evidently

did not like the subject ; and this, and a great many things lately, have made me fancy that Claud must have loved her—and of course she *must* have loved him. Did you see how she tried to shrink from me to-day, and looked so pale and so unhappy ? It was just the same, I assure you, at Lord Duncan's that night. I have tried to put these thoughts out of my head," she continued, whilst I, much distressed, knew not what to say ; "and I am sure I have never made Claud suspect my jealous imaginings. Just before he left me the other day, I suggested that he should call his yacht 'the Stella,' and he agreed to it,—but did not look me in the face when we talked upon the subject—I marked that well."

And again she wept silently.

"My dear young lady," I now faltered, "you must not thus distress your mind with what, after all, to you are only fancies."

"No, Lea," removing her hands from before her face, and looking at me with earnest scrutiny, "but are *you* quite sure that they are only fancies ?"

"My dear, they may not be exactly so as regards the past, perhaps; but even if he knew, or even admired this young lady abroad, what does it matter now?"

"No—certainly," she said, rather proudly, "he is my husband, and Stella is to be Lord Duncan's wife; yet, Lea," and her old, dark look took possession of her countenance, "if I had dreamt at the time of our engagement that there was any thing of the sort upon his mind—do you think that, miserable as it appeared to me then to live without Claud, I should have wished any longer to marry him? Oh, no, he did not love me, as you, Lea, and every one else perceived—nor was I so blind either as to fancy it; but I saw the worldly advantage the marriage would be to him, and also I had such strong faith in the hope that my affection—my devotion to his happiness would, in the end, win from him some reciprocal feeling. But if he loved another all the time and that other the lovely, bewitching creature we have just seen, (oh! why did not some one suggest to me the possibility

of such a thing!) Oh, poor Claud! well may you hate me—and if he still loves her, oh, still more wretched Blanche!”

* * * * *

We arrived at home just at this minute, and she went dreary and miserable into her dressing-room. I feared that she would have but an unhappy day of it; for when that dark expression came over her countenance, I knew it was far worse for her than when she gave more open vent to her feelings.

To me, who so well knew how far the reality even exceeded her worst suspicions on the subject, and therefore was unable to say much in the way of argument or consolation in the case, it was doubly distressing.

Having been absent from her for about an hour, I went into my young lady's dressing-room, not liking to leave her long alone.

I found her bending over some drawers, in which were disposed, in regular order, the most perfect display of baby clothes that ever brightened a young expectant mother's eyes.

“Oh, Lea!” she exclaimed, on my entrance, in a tone which quite startled me by its eager animation, whilst her countenance seemed positively illumined with the glad sunshine of her heart, “do come here. The baby clothes have just arrived from Mrs. Moon’s, and I have been arranging some of them in these drawers—you must help me to do the rest—see how beautiful they look altogether. I must,” she added, “really show all this to Claud, when he comes home to-morrow. Oh, Lea!” in a suddenly changed tone, her eyes suffusing with bright tear drops—but not like the bitter ones she had shed before that morning—“whatever he *may* have done—surely—surely he will—he must love me when our little child is born—while I—” she added, in a sad, low voice, as sinking on her knees, she laid her dear cheek gently on the little snowy white pile placed upon a chair, “shall have at least my baby, to love and teach to love me, whatever else may happen. Do you remember, Lea,” she added, in a subdued and quiet tone, when at length she

rose, and resumed her interesting occupation,
“how that sweet little Edwy used to love me?
perhaps our new expected darling may be
like him!”

CHAPTER XXII.

THE report was far from incorrect which announced the nuptials of Lord Duncan to the opera-singer, Anna Stella, otherwise Miss Fitz-Henry, as *une affaire arrangée*.

His friends and relations might be offended, the world of fashion, its mothers and daughters in particular, filled with envy and with spite; what cared his lordship for any of these?

This gem of beauty and of melody would be his; and he was as proud and satisfied, as another would have been, to have claimed a princess as his prize.

My readers will imagine easily, how much the endeavours of Mrs. Fitz-Henry, and how

little the heart of Stella, had been instrumental in bringing matters to this pass.

Stella had been much grieved of late by her mother's change of manner toward her; a change she attributed, not without foundation, to her having fallen short of her expectations with regard to her professional success.

One morning, after in vain endeavouring to elicit a kind word from her offended parent, the poor girl threw herself upon her mother's neck, sobbing forth her sorrow and contrition for her short-comings on that account, promising, as she had often done before, to rally her powers for the future, and to make up, if possible, for the past.

But Mrs. Fitz-Henry gravely, but not unkindly, told her, she need not trouble herself any further on that account; that she would very probably be soon called on to make her last appearance on the stage.

"Lord Duncan," she added, "has this very day made most flattering and generous proposals for your hand; such an offer, under the present aspect of affairs, could not, of course, be

refused ; his lordship will wait on you," she said, "to-morrow ; therefore, Stella, you must prepare yourself to receive his visit."

"But not accept him," was the faint despairing cry ; "oh no ! no, mamma, never ! Let me sing, act, work—do any thing but accept Lord Duncan. Oh mamma ! mamma ! pray say I may refuse him."

Then her name was pronounced by Mrs. Fitz-Henry, with such an expression of concentrated anger, reproach and scorn, that Stella shrinkingly covered her face with her hands, as if her mother's stern hard eye could glance down into her very breast, and draw out to light the feeling chiefly lurking there, which made the idea of marriage with Lord Duncan, (as it would have done with any man on earth) so terrible and repugnant to her mind.

"Stella," again repeated Mrs. Fitz-Henry, in the same terrific voice, "I must know the reason of all this—speak, I desire. I say again, what is your reason for wishing to refuse Lord Duncan ?"

And now the very awakening of the poor

girl's consciousness on this point, the unhappy and now most guilty attachment, which her still pure mind shrank with horror to feel so unsubdued within her heart, took part with the terror excited by her mother's anger, to revoke her first words of horrified deprecation of the marriage proposed, and make her finally more disposed to yield to Lord Duncan's noble offer.

If some desperate means must be taken to crush the serpent in her breast, what would be more effectual than a union with another? She did not love Lord Duncan—she almost feared she never could, though she would try her best to do her duty by him as his wife. Then to think of Claud any longer, was such misery and madness; to neglect any measures which promised the annihilation of such feelings, seemed, poor unhappy girl, so sinful in her eyes, that after enduring much anguish of spirit—unsustained but by her own weak strength, and guided by no more certain light than that which the dictates of her own benighted sense of right and wrong supplied

—she resolved that there was nothing left for her, but to do this required violence to her feelings, to attempt not to resist her mother in this serious and desperate concern. And so, trembling and pale, she on the following day, when Lord Duncan paid his promised visit, consented to become his wife.

And that very night, though the fact was not generally known, Anna Stella made her last appearance on the Opera boards. On this occasion too, with that strange contrariety, common to human nature, she both sang and acted superbly ; with a passionate pathos and a thrilling power, which startled her hearers into delighted silence or rapturous applause ; never, before, perhaps, had they seen her sweet strength so taxed to its full height, heard her

“ With all the god upon her lips ! ”

And Lord Duncan, who, before the curtain fell, had rushed behind the scenes to be ready to receive his betrothed, and conduct her to the

carriage, transported with love, rapture, and admiration, and misinterpreting the emotion with which he found her still overpowered—thanked, her, almost on his knees, for all the glory and honour she was relinquishing for his sake—whilst he scarcely dared even to look at Mrs. Fitz-Henry, so fearful did his lover-like feelings render him at the moment, lest she should have repented giving him such a treasure of a daughter; for his lordship was well aware how firmly the mother's hopes and desires had been concentrated on Stella's professional success, and that he in no slight measure owed his present happiness to her disappointment in that respect. He little understood the heart of an ambitious woman. He had, indeed, no occasion for alarm on this account: obstinately as Mrs. Fitz-Henry's hopes and wishes had been bent in one direction, now that bent having once been relaxed, it was only with the same avidity and earnestness that they inclined towards another and a higher. In short, her new ambition had now quite superseded the last; so that

his brilliant close of the career she abandoned for her daughter rather added to her triumph than awakened any slumbering regret within her mind.

With proud humility, therefore, she deprecated his lordship's generous scruples on this head—and responded for her drooping Stella, “that there was no sacrifice on *her* part involved in the affair. The sacrifice, if any, was on his lordship's part.”

But to this, as may be imagined, the lover would not listen for a moment. As to the degree in which Stella's feelings responded to his own, Lord Duncan did not seem to allow himself to entertain any uncomfortable doubts.

She had yielded her consent, as far as he could perceive, most readily; how far influenced by her mother, he did not care to inquire. It was enough that she had accepted him; any coldness that she might manifest after their engagement—any variableness of spirits, even of temper, that she might display—only the more piqued his vanity and quick-

ened his admiring fancy. He was, of course, for the present, the willing slave of her every fancy and caprice.

Stella had desired almost from the first that he would call her Anna, for she could better endure to hear that less familiar name pronounced by his lips, coupled with the language of lover-like adoration, than the other ; and much as Lord Duncan preferred the name of Stella, with its graceful associations and appropriate significance, after a little playful resistance he consented to obey, of course, attributing this caprice on Stella's part to every reason but the right.

His lordship, in the meanwhile, was not at all forgetful of the *affaire de cœur* which had existed between his *fiancée* and the young Loraine. But it was a recollection which by no way disturbed his mind, but gave, perhaps, only a keener edge to his present satisfaction ; whilst he was far too experienced a man of the world to care for what was said or seen respecting the young man's rekindled flame, much less to watch with trembling jealousy

if the cheek of his beloved should chance to turn pale at the name or sight of her former boyish admirer, who, as a married man too, was, as a matter of course, effectually removed out of the sphere of her consideration.

* * * * *

In the mean time, preparations were set on foot on a most princely and splendid scale to do honour to the intended bride ; and the world more than ever wondered, sneered, or envied. Then, too, to the far greater surprise of the invidious, rich relations came pressing forward to contribute a handsome dower for their niece, in proof to the sneering world that it was no penniless adventuress with whom his lordship deigned to stoop to an alliance, and whom society might choose to despise.

Great indeed was the satisfaction of those good Lancashire friends, at the auspicious termination of a course of life they had so feared and deprecated for their young kinswoman ; and high was the triumph with

which Mrs. Fitz-Henry witnessed their delighted astonishment at the overthrow of so many dark anticipations and direful prognostications. Stella, ought, indeed, to have been pleased. Every thing appeared to be at her feet—her destiny the envy of so many. But there was that within her—conscience—that worm which never dieth—casting its bitterness into all that looked so fair.

However, there was too much proud joy in the hearts of those about her, to notice whether the smiles were forced or real. Every one interested in the matter, to say nothing of the chief actor in question, was in as high a state of peace and security as has often been the case with people before the fall of a thunder-bolt, or on the eve of an earthquake.

* * * * *

Lady Anna Damer had insisted that the wedding should take place from her house, and, indeed, that Mrs. Fitz-Henry should remove immediately to Berkeley Square, where she resided in a spacious mansion; and this

Mrs. Fitz-Henry promised to do, as soon as the bustle of preparation was nearly over.

In the meantime, Stella found herself possessed of much more liberty than she had ever done before in her life. The mother, now secure of her daughter's prospects, and no longer under the excitement of her musical mania, no more practising required, no more constant fears that the voice might suffer, the singer overfatigue herself,—forgot all but the delight of aiding the generous lavish Lord Duncan displayed in making arrangements for the forthcoming event.

And Stella's occupation gone—Lord Duncan much occupied and often necessarily absent—nothing now to do but to think of the past and future—how did she fill the vacuum of her mind?

CHAPTER XXIII.

LORD DUNCAN had gone to Edinburgh. He had large estates in Scotland, and he went on business connected with the settlements. Almost immediately on his return, the marriage was to take place.

Mrs. Fitz-Henry was confined to her bed for some days with a slight indisposition. Poor woman ! she had suffered, in no inconsiderable degree, from the excitement of the present period, combined with all the previous struggles of the last year or two. Even her hard nerves began to feel relaxed.

Stella, during this interval, was a great deal with Mrs. Duncan, the handsome sister-in-law of her future lord.

She was with her at the Opera one of the last nights of the season. Though seated, as became the modest and retiring *fiancée*, almost concealed behind the curtain, with flushing cheek and drooping brow turned towards the stage, she would scarcely have been recognized but for the diamond star which flashed occasionally on the sight.

Her young and handsome chaperone, who sat opposite in more conspicuous view, was apparently engaged in a little lively flirtation with a still more youthful and handsome cavalier.

It was Claud Loraine Fordyce, who had become a great ally of hers lately; and who was one, moreover, whom the greatest beauties in London were only too proud to retain half an hour by their side.

What a world of varied interest may not an opera house afford! Not a box in yonder sparkling circle but has its history, or its poetry!

In another might be seen a lady with pearls in her hair, as young, or younger

than either of the other two we have just been particularizing. But her cheek and brow wore the dark, dull look of care or discontent, whilst suffering, either of a physical or mental nature—perhaps both—seemed impressed upon her countenance. She was accompanied by another lady and a gentleman; but though she listened occasionally with a sort of nervous solicitude to their remarks and conversation, she spoke little herself, but, ever and anon, cast absent, anxious glances around the house, and towards the door.

At length she turned, and put some question to the gentleman; his reply to which, seemed, at least, to have the effect of fixing her gaze with a steadfastness on the stage, which never, till the Opera ended, again relaxed. But it must be a thunder-cloud which has cast its dark, motionless shadow over her countenance! Dark—it was dark before—it is blackness now!

“Mr. Shaw,” Blanche had said to the young man by her side, and who, accompanied by his sister, her former bridesmaid, were the occu-

pants of her box that evening, "did you say that Claud, my husband, was——?"

"Yes," he answered, "he is with Mrs. Duncan, in Lord Duncan's box. Mrs. Duncan is certainly handsome, but there is no need for jealousy, Mrs. Fordyce Loraine," he added, with a smile. "She is a very general, and, therefore, a very harmless flirt."

"And La Stella, whom I so long to see," said the sister, who had but just come to London, and whose seat commanded a full view of the house, "she *will* keep behind the curtain; I can but just see from time to time the glitter of her star—that star which has made so much sensation—that emblem of her beautiful self! Oh! why will she be so intent upon the music? She must have had enough of that in her life, and sung she has to some effect."

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And the Opera over, Blanche is put into the carriage by her stranger friend, and driven back unaccompanied to her lonely home.

Yes, lonely now! but Blanche's brow re-

laxes its contraction, as she casts her eyes around her dressing-room, through which she passes to the adjoining chamber, now filled with every preparation for the expected babe.

She lifts the covering thrown over the beautiful cot, draws aside the little curtain, and gazes fixedly within.

In imagination she sees the infant she so longs to hold in her arms—Claud's child!—yes, his! that so fondly loved, but little loving husband!

Tears fall upon the small laced pillow. Poor Blanche! then you shed tears of joy, and the dark sadness of your brow is illumined at the thought.

“Yes, for Nature brings the solace,
Soon a tender voice will cry,—
’Twill be a purer life than thine,
A lip to drain thy trouble dry.”

“Baby fingers, waxen touches,” already seem to press the gnawing sorrow “from the mother’s breast.” Yet this even cannot quite suffice. Still, above all, there struggles up the

inward cry, half prayer, half self-pitying soliloquy—

“Surely, surely, he must love me better when our little child is born!”

More need, indeed, did the poor young wife feel for this assurance, even than when first it issued from her lips.

Since Claud had last returned from Cowes,—indeed, from the time she had with the open-hearted simplicity natural to her character, and with the earnest endeavour, at the same time, that nothing in her voice and manner should give index to the anxious suspicions which had been awakened in her mind, related to him the adventure concerning Stella and her little dog; and he had listened with such startled, such betrayed consciousness in his mien and countenance, then turned from her with that same glance, only far stronger in its intensity, which had once before chilled her very soul within her,—yes, from that time she had had, indeed, to bear as much as any woman but herself perhaps could have borne, from wounded affection, unkindness, and neglect; and though

Blanche had been schooled by Claud himself to endure a great deal, there is a farthest point to all things !

* * * * *

And to poor Blanche had now arrived the period in which the tenderest sympathy is needful, the utmost indulgence required, to cheer and raise the fainting heart—

“Bowed down with trembling fears and bodings vain,
Busied with dark imaginings,
And drinking the anticipated cup of grief and pain.”

Thrown, as it were, upon a land of strangers, for so to her appeared the wide, cold London world, with no more kindred ties on whom could dwell—

“The love which sought to be beloved as well,—
Too sensitive for flattery, and too kind
To bear the loneliness by fate assigned—”

with only one faithful friend of other days near her to soothe and cheer, and she a servant ; to whom, though a faithful and a loving one,

a wife's pride and dignity restrained her from unbosoming too fully the reigning sorrow of her heart, as long as that heart could contain the fulness of its misery. Much did the lonely mournfulness of her situation prey upon her mind and overcome her sinking spirits; but still would she not have borne it less well, had it not been for the very prospect of the coming event;—"Oh, yes! for when our little child is born," was still the watchword of her weary soul, the prospect to which her aching eyes were ever strained in joyful anticipation, as the event, the *something*, which in some mysterious manner was to change the order of her destiny, remove sorrow from her path, and clear away the darkest clouds from her horizon.

Ah, that glittering hope,

"With eyes so fair,"

that "something" in the future, to which there is scarce an eye which has not strained, or still is straining, with the same sanguine trust, the same longing desire, as the expected panacea of all our woe, the crown of all our

happiness—will it fulfil, when gained, those high-wrought expectations? or, like the fabled apples, turn to ashes between the teeth; drop, like the fabled flower, from our listless, disappointed grasp?

No; our panacea, our crown of happiness, *is* surely in the future: but on no future this side the grave let our hearts dare repose their trust.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A STARTLING rumour is destined to electrify the eager London world the day on which another morning dawned ; and before it closed, the report has become only too clearly substantiated.

Miss Fitz-Henry, *alias* Anna Stella, the late opera singer, and since the betrothed bride of Lord Duncan, had disappeared from her home—eloped—and with whom ? Ah, that was the most astounding and scandalizing part of the story.

Yes, it was all too true ; the star had fallen ! ere the first faint whisper of such a dire event had transpired, many miles away, a yacht,

which had long lain anchored in the harbour, ready manned with fitting crew, and victualled for an autumn cruize, might have been seen when morning broke—

“Nor yet a blue smoke rose
From glade or misty vale or far-off town,”

—gliding swiftly away, one only sign of life,

* * * * *

Beneath the silence of the bright'ning heavens—

with every snowy sail unfurled before the favouring breeze, and gaily, lightly, soon was dancing upon the glittering ocean.

Ah, who that saw it thus had thought it bore the heavy burden of two guilty souls flying sinfully together, leaving far behind them breaking, bleeding, maddened hearts?

On this same morning, about an hour before noon, a lady knocked at the door of the Loraine Fordyce's residence.

She was a tall, gaunt-looking personage, of commanding presence, and something remarkable in her whole appearance, the wild,

almost fierce agitation, conspicuous in her mien and countenance, caused the servant to hesitate at first, as if fearful as much to refuse or to obey, when she desired immediately to see his lady.

But there was so much of strange and mysterious in the wind that morning, that the man, on second thoughts, hesitated no longer, but ushered the visitor into the nearest apartment, the wide and gloomy dining-room, then civilly requested her name. The stranger made an effort to reply, but it was ineffectual; the words seemed choked within her throat, and by an impatient gesture of her head, she seemed to intimate that any announcement was unnecessary. And there, standing in the centre of the room, as if rooted to the spot, her hands clenched, her tall form rocking to and fro like some lonely forest tree before the strong winter's wind, she remained, till the door was opened, and another female figure made her appearance, slowly, heavily advancing a few paces, walking like one with shackled limbs, or under the influence of somnambu-

lism. And such a countenance! so dark, so still, so petrified, as it were, by some wild horror. But her visitor heeded this not. With almost frantic vehemence, she hastened to meet her, whilst from her lips, in tones which might have aroused the very dead, issued the fearful cry—

“Your husband, madam! your vile, unworthy husband! My child! my child! he has taken away my child!”

And with her clenched hand upraised, and eyes which seemed to emit the red glare of insanity, she called down dreadful imprecations on that husband’s head.

And there still the other stood—mute, motionless; her features relaxing not their fixed rigidity, only her woe-struck eyes follow the gestures of her frantic visitor, with a kind of stupid, callous wonderment, as if they would have said, “What means all this? who is there in the universe that has cause to curse my husband? On whom has he brought grief, dishonour, and madness, but on myself?”

And even at the height of her own self-

absorbing despair, the attention of the wretched woman, whom my readers will have recognized as Mrs. Fitz-Henry, seemed suddenly arrested, her own loud, selfish misery rebuked by the silent, stony agony which had impressed itself in the whole form and aspect of the poor forsaken young creature before her—the desolate, abandoned wife, so soon to become a mother. Wretch—oh, wretch, indeed! And again she was tempted to raise her voice and curse him, for the sake of her who stood there so like the statue of despair. Yes, she who, but a moment before, was ready to exclaim, “Look and see is there any other sorrow like unto my sorrow?” now, in the strong revulsion of her feelings, sinks low upon the ground at Blanche’s feet, and holding her garment—for

“Grief, amidst her pomp, is high fantastical”—

smites her stern breast, and cries to her, with eyes, pouring down, as it were, tears of blood, lifted to her face, not to curse her child—her wretched, her lost, her fallen Stella.

Then—for nothing in return she wins but that same blank, dreary look, which might well have struck dismay into the hardest spirit—she rises precipitately, and rushes wildly forth from the unbearable scene as from a sanctuary, which, in her desperate madness, she had profaned, only to the further discomfort of her tortured soul.

Yes, she goes forth, the bright sun shines mockingly upon the miserable, heart-stricken mother, on whose head Heaven had let fall that fiercest bolt, whose scathing wounds no after-time can ever efface; that grief for which there is no hope, no resignation—the *dishonour of a child*; goes forth a second Ceres in search of the ravished Proserpine, to seek her unhappy daughter throughout the world.

And almost ere the door had closed upon her tragic form; within the house she had so strangely visited, for what purpose, with what view, she herself perhaps scarcely in her distraction knew, except it were to seek confirmation of the truth, or impotently to curse the

author of this misery, as she had truly done
—the scene is changed.

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The dark, deep trance of mental misery, which even the infuriated presence of the miserable mother had failed to dispel, has given way before the strong sharp hand of nature's suffering.

END OF VOL. II.



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